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by Diane Scharper

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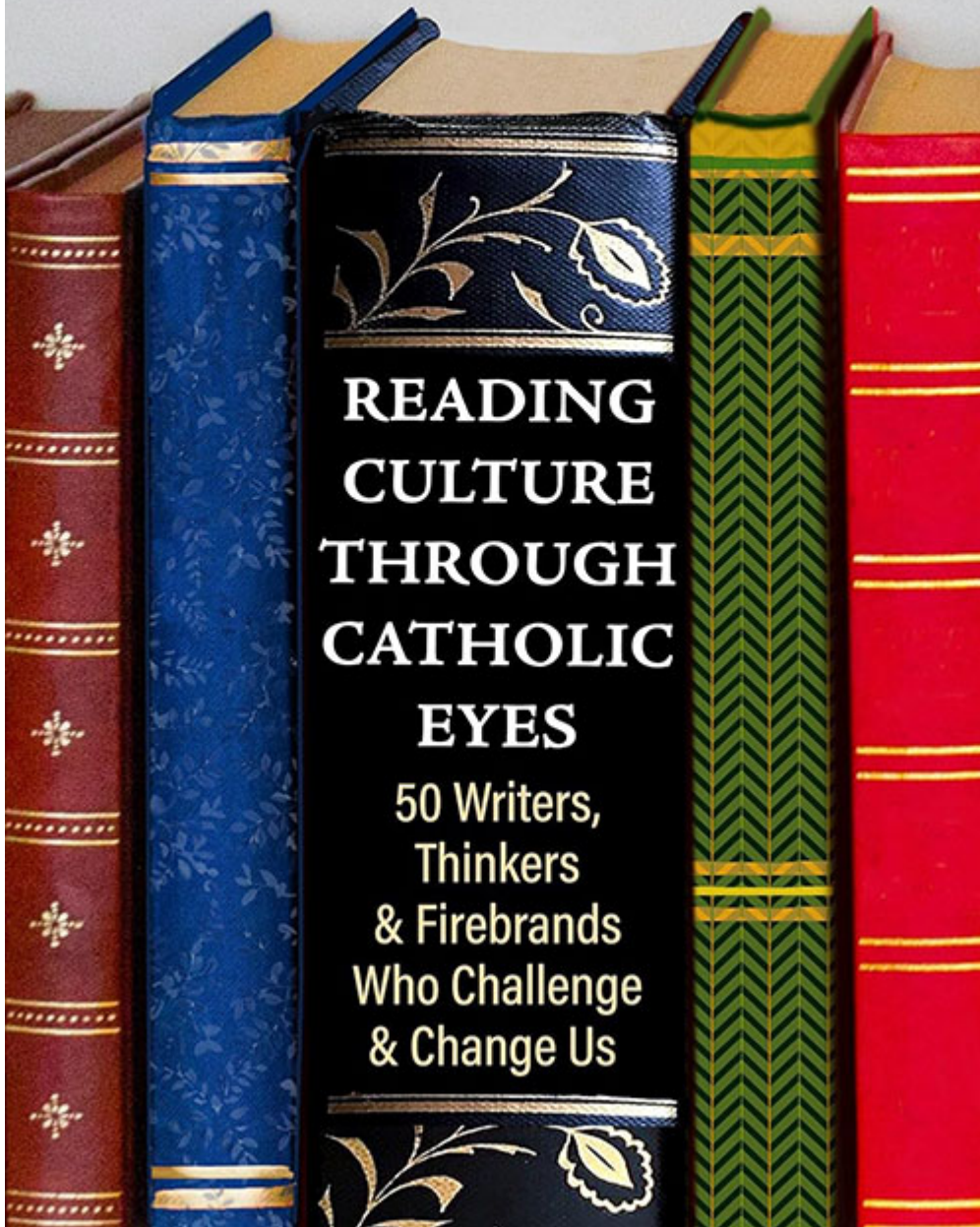
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March 22, 2025

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JAMES T. KEANE

Introduction by James Martin, SJ



READING CULTURE THROUGH CATHOLIC EYES

50 Writers,
Thinkers
& Firebrands
Who Challenge
& Change Us

Reading Culture Through Catholic Eyes: 50 Writers, Thinkers and Firebrands Who Challenge and Change Us

James T. Keane

224 pages; Orbis

\$25.00

The award-winning Black feminist author [Toni Morrison](#) converted to Roman Catholicism in her teens, taking Anthony as her baptismal name and using Toni as a pen name. She wrote fiction featuring slavery, racism, sexuality, rape, profanity, police brutality and controversial aspects of culture. Her work can be difficult to read for white people and for Roman Catholics.

James Keane's new book, [Reading Culture Through Catholic Eyes: 50 Writers, Thinkers, and Firebrands Who Challenge and Change Us](#), focuses on bestselling firebrand Catholic writers like Morrison.

She received high praise for her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. She won the National Book Critics Circle Award for a later novel, *Song of Solomon*. She was given the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Beloved* and received the Nobel Prize for her work overall.



Toni Morrison (CNS/Reuters/Philippe Wojazer)

Those three novels, Keane notes, were among several works by Morrison included on a challenged books list because their content was considered inappropriate. *Beloved*, for example, was based on a true story in which an enslaved woman murdered her daughter to keep her from suffering a life of slavery.

An editor at America Media, Keane writes columns profiling exceptional Catholic writers and discusses what makes them first-rate in his eyes. And it's not merely familiarity with Catholic culture as some Catholic journals might suggest.

That type of Catholic awareness can at times make for maudlin writing, while the ability to think outside the box can inspire a reader's soul-making. Jesus Christ did as much with his teachings, which are what underlie the best work by people like [Dorothy Day](#), J.R.R. Tolkien, [Flannery O'Connor](#) and others.

Keane discusses O'Connor in his chapter on Fr. William Lynch, a Jesuit Catholic intellectual and one of O'Connor's favorites. Both shared the idea that the world is infused with the beauty of God. Keane explains, "Every human beauty, for Lynch as well as for O'Connor, points toward and is referent to a divine, transcendental beauty."

Keane doesn't say this, but I imagine both were familiar with Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "God's Grandeur," and the lines:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil ...

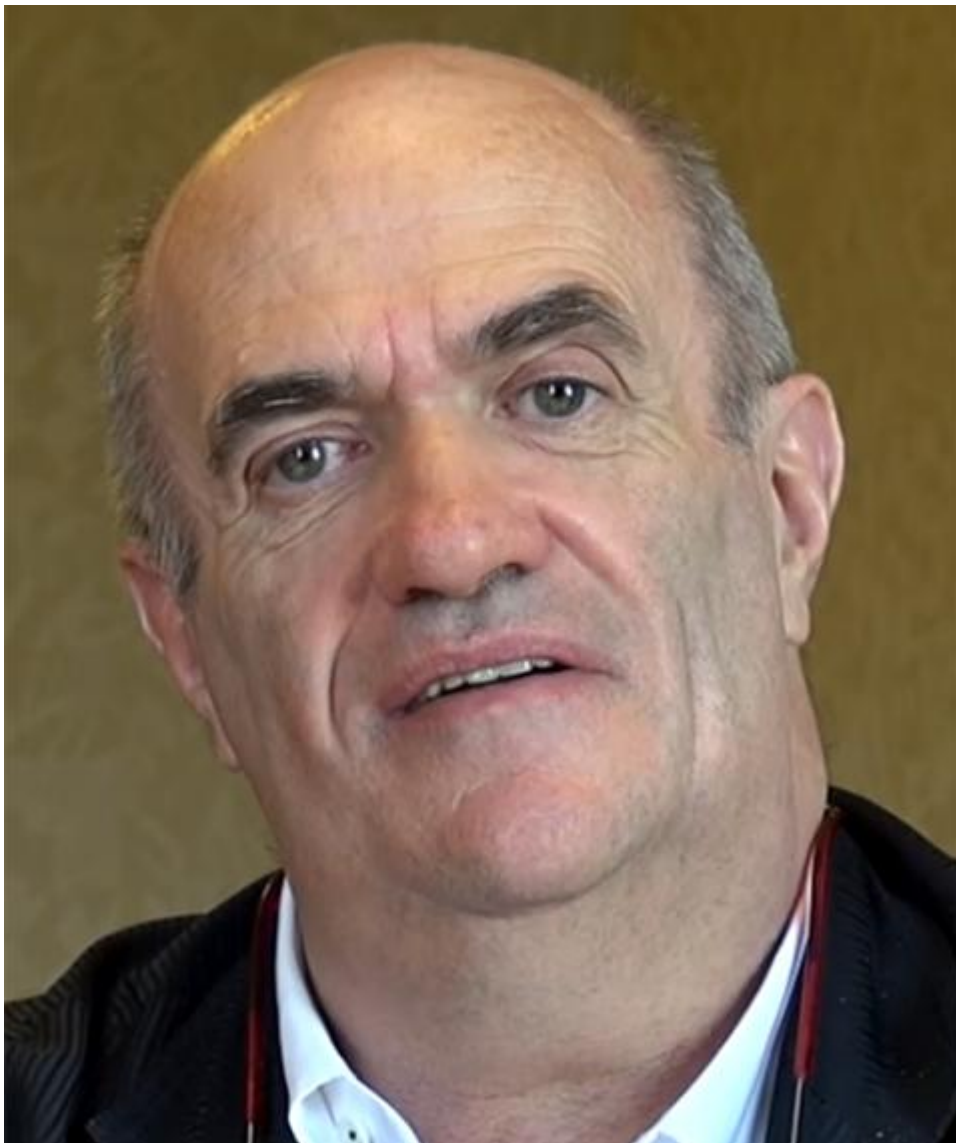
Lynch also wondered how one would define a Catholic writer, whether there was such a classification, and what quality Catholic writers bring to their work. Keane suggests that wrestling with Catholic dogma and moral teaching is one such quality.

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Keane starts off by citing a [review essay](#) by Myles Connolly that asked why American Catholic writers are so boring. Keane answers the question throughout his book by showing that Catholic writers don't have to be boring. The best ones are enthralling.

Keane profiles authors who challenge readers. He includes Graham Greene, for instance, with his comment, "There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in." As *Reading Culture* sees it, the best writers recognize such moments and use them to enhance their writing.

Keane offers a wide range of writers and subjects covering tomes he's read from childhood through college, and then his time in the Jesuit seminary, his job as editor for Orbis Books and his present position as senior editor of America Media.



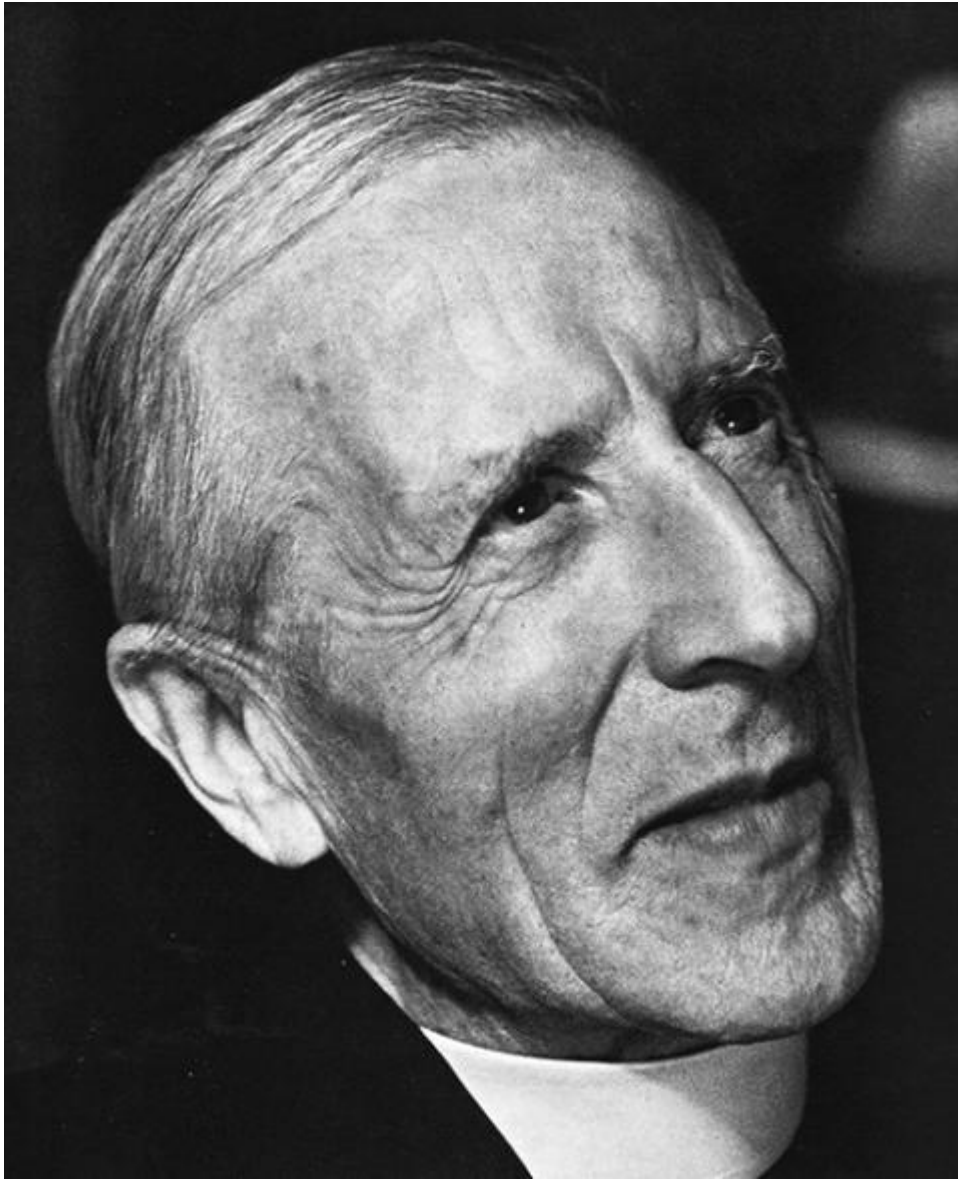
Colm Tóibín (Wikimedia Commons/librairie mollat)

As he explained it in an interview with [Robert Ellsberg](#), editor-in-chief of Orbis books, Keane chose 50 columns of the 150 that he wrote for America magazine, looking for spice. He didn't want "low-hanging fruit." He wanted diamonds in the rough like Leonard Feeney, who was an editor at America and was a pugnacious book reviewer. Feeney also clashed with the Catholic Church and was excommunicated as he insisted that there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church.

One of the questions informing *Reading Culture* is: What makes a writer Catholic? Keane comes up with several answers beyond the obvious ones like familiarity with Catholic beliefs and rituals, as well as shared understanding of Jesus Christ, the Gospels, the sacraments and the saints.

For Keane, those seem to be the least important aspects of a Catholic writer. Take Colm Tóibín's book [The Testament of Mary](#), which features an angry Mary who doesn't know what to think about her son and his friends. She raised him and thinks she knows him and so has a difficult time believing he can perform miracles, let alone rise from the dead.

The books Keane covers are diverse. They range from *The Liars' Club* by Mary Karr, to *Mr. Blue* by Connolly, to *Deliverance* by James Dickey, to *Christ and Apollo* by Lynch.



Jesuit Fr. Teilhard de Chardin (OSV News/Archives des Jesuits de France via Public Domain)

The authors include J.D. Salinger, Andre Dubus (both father and son), [Pierre Teilhard de Chardin](#), Tolkien and others from America, Europe and Asia. Some consider themselves atheists. Others are believers with a vague sense of religion.

Two of the most engaging and ironic chapters concern Andre Dubus and his son, Andre Dubus III. Discussing the elder Dubus, Keane focuses on his poignant short story, "A Father's Story," in which a father lies to protect his daughter and prays that God (who is also a father) forgives him for the lie. The other chapter centers on

Dubus III, who is quoted saying that he's not an atheist, "nor do I believe that anyone's listening either, but still, I pray [for his three children]."

The New York Times extolled the work of many of these writers, saying that their novels and essays read like poetry. Critics praised the evocative details that bring their subject alive for readers, as in this stunning quote from Teilhard de Chardin:

Someday after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.

Ultimately, as Keane implies, the work of these Catholic writers may be poetic, but it is also cutting edge and biting. All of which can make for powerful writing, the kind of work Keane looks for from the Catholic novelists, poets, memoirists and journalists whom he profiles in this absorbing and informative book.