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By

Caspar David Friedrich

Johannes Grave

PRESTEL

Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) transformed landscape painting and was undoubtedly the greatest of the German Romantic painters. But his strange, deeply spiritual canvases, which conveyed the numinous experience of nature, lost favor in the final decades of his life, as Romanticism fell out of fashion. Critics and the public took a very long time warming to his work again—perhaps not surprisingly, for although his paintings are overwhelming (in many senses of the word), they are hardly welcoming; many of his paintings bleakly emphasize the insignificance of man in nature. The artist himself was hardly a joiner. Accused of misanthropy, Friedrich obtusely countered, “To love people, I must avoid their company”—a viewpoint not lost in his paintings.

The nature he depicts, especially in such celebrated winterscapes as *The Polar Sea*, is stark indeed; the art historian Hermann Beenken wrote that Friedrich painted winter scenes in which “no man had yet set his foot.” And the Nazis’ unfortunate embrace of his work cast a pall that no doubt further delayed the rehabilitation of his reputation. But since the 1970s, beginning perhaps with a famous exhibition of his work at the Tate Gallery, Friedrich’s work has been celebrated, and his influence, on artists such as Anselm Kiefer and Gerhard Richter, has burgeoned. The number of significant books on Friedrich’s art—including, most notably, volumes by Werner Hofmann and Joseph Leo Koerner—continues to grow. Now, with this book by Grave, a German academic currently organizing a colossal exhibition of German art for the Louvre, we have by far the most sumptuous and historically informed text. Building on the insights of previous critics and scholars, Grave skillfully assesses Friedrich’s canvases (reproduced here more beautifully than in any previous book), but his greater achievement is authoritatively placing Friedrich’s work in its cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic context.

A Good Hard Look

Ann Napolitano

PENGUIN

To use a real person as a fictional character is a daring business; to use a writer with a well-known and eminently distinctive voice and point of view might be considered an act of hubris. But Napolitano has bravely pulled it off in this carefully crafted novel centered on Flannery O’Connor. Wisely, Napolitano never attempts to re-create O’Connor’s flinty prose style (nor does she stick precisely to the true events of O’Connor’s life); instead she employs the writer’s reputation for unflinching honesty and preoccupation with the need for salvation, in order to organize a boldly drawn story that essentially shows how love can open people to the world.

Unsurprisingly, given O’Connor’s presence, the plot features gothic violence, but while this would likely be a grotesque culmination in a story by O’Connor herself, presented in Napolitano’s deliberate, calm style, it’s less distorted and hideous than terribly sad, and the healing afterword—slow but seemingly inevitable—forms almost as much of the novel as the transgressions leading to it. One suspects that O’Connor might not relish her part in a world so much more hopeful than the one she depicted, but Napolitano is entitled to her outlook, and if the novel’s tidiness is at odds with life, Napolitano should nevertheless be applauded for her willingness to explore dark and difficult emotions. Given the obvious attention awarded to each sentence, the few clichés (*like a moth to a flame* on the very last page!) are regrettable, but the way Napolitano uses O’Connor’s famous peacocks throughout as both metaphor and plot device is terrific. When published in hardcover last year, this novel was largely overlooked—which in our debased literary culture means that *The New York Times* failed to review it. Now in paperback, it deserves a second chance.

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