

# An American Wilderness Experience

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An American Wilderness Experience: A Weekend of Conversation with the Trinity in a Shack with Sophia, Personification of Wisdom, Putting in an Appearance (Are you following me so far?)

A number of Corrymeela members have been asking me: Have you read *The Shack*? Yes, I have now read *The Shack*. *The Shack* is at one level truly terrible and deeply sentimental fiction. What it also shows is that God and Christ (let alone the Holy Spirit) cannot be credibly portrayed in fiction. Good fiction written by committed Christians (e.g. Muriel Spark, Flannery O'Connor, Marilynne Robinson) can bring us into the realm of mystery, incongruity, strangeness, obliqueness, absurdity (often Christian writers are comic writers), the absence or the odd presence of a quality that can be described as 'grace', and the presence of the 'good' – and sometimes its profound absence. These novelists raise 'religious' questions – but questions that cannot be answered in the context of fiction. Fiction cannot deliver completeness. God does not appear unambiguously. This may be frustrating for religious people who want answers plonked down in novels – preferably in banal prose – but it is the truth.

If people want to read good fiction written by a Christian writer they should look at the recently republished collected short stories of Flannery O'Connor. She was one of the truly great American writers of the 20th century. A really fierce Catholic, she wrote about southern fundamentalists – 'freaks' that good liberals would shudder at. She knew about absurdity and she had a merciless eye for hypocrisy – including liberal middle class hypocrisy.

What good can be said about *The Shack*, then? The emphasis of *The Shack*'s theology is on relationships, love, forgiveness and reconciliation. There is laughter and fun – this is a Trinity that you would want to be in relationship with, and to have conversation with. There is a gracious orthodoxy, rather than a graceless, judgemental fundamentalism. And that cannot be bad.

**David Stevens**