

BRIAN MOORE

A Catholic, often a priest, losing his faith has become the trademark of Brian Moore's fiction. There are other recurrences -- someone in the hotel business, a failed poet, surprising mothers, some of the most believable women characters in contemporary fiction -- but it is the loosening grip on faith that provides Moore with the theme of most of his novels.

In *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, published in 1956, Brian Moore gave us an unforgettably moving portrait of a Belfast spinster whose life is a downward spiral of misfortune due to plain looks, a domineering aunt and alcohol. It is when doubts against her faith are added to envy and surreptitious sipping that the story reaches its climax. Judith, drunk, doubtful that Jesus resides sacramentally behind the closed doors of the tabernacle, reels into the sanctuary and up the altar steps and tries ineffectually to pry open the tabernacle.

This was Brian Moore's first novel. One of his most recent, *No Other Life*, set in what most readers will imagine as Haiti, concerns a black priest who rises to the presidency while the narrator, his white mentor, a Canadian priest, loses his faith and, in the words of the title, concludes that there is no other life than this one. It is to Moore's artistic credit that the lone alternative to eternal life is stark, violent and irrational.

A Catholic, often a priest, losing his faith has become the trademark of Brian Moore's fiction. There are other recurrences -- someone in the hotel business, a failed poet, surprising mothers, some of the most

believable women characters in contemporary fiction -- but it is the loosening grip on faith that provides Moore with the theme of most of his novels. Aspects of his own ambiguous national identity are also frequent.

A native of Belfast who emigrated to Canada -- where his fiction career began -- but has long lived in California (see *Fergus*, 1970), Moore still seems most imaginatively at home in an Irish background. His antepenultimate novel, *Lies of Silence* (1990), set in an authoritatively evoked Belfast, is perhaps the most plotted of his stories, yet it retains the looked-for Moore interiorization of the action plot that turns a thriller into a drama of moral victory in defeat.

We are not surprised to learn that Brian Moore's heroes read, among other favorite authors, Graham Greene. In the Irish as in the English author, there is a persistent rivalry between lust and religious practices, with the latter, and the faith that sustains them, eventually eclipsed by adulterous liaisons. Equally, there is a refusal to allow sexual self-indulgence to rise much above the sordid. Religion may be shuffled off, but untroubled liberation is not the result; rather there is a concatenation of disastrous effects that almost seem an argument for chastity if not indeed celibacy.

The moonscape power of Moore's fiction lies precisely here. The loss of faith is loss indeed, and it is often taken to have Dostoevskian consequences. If God does not exist, anything goes. But there is a residual

decency in his characters which prevents them from taking, save in evanescent fantasy, a nihilist route.

In *Lies of Silence*, Michael Dillon endangers the life of the wife he longs to leave by saving hundreds from an IRS bomb, leaves his wife and Ireland with a young BBC woman whose attractions seem largely those of a sexual acrobat, dissociates himself from his wife's highly public defiance of the terrorists, vacillates between giving testimony against one of the terrorists and then, having decided on the only honorable course... Well, there then follows an ending that only a serious writer would dare to write.

I know nothing more about Brian Moore than what can be gleaned from the dust jackets of his novels. This is in many ways refreshing: he is a writer content to let his writings speak for him. In the age of the literary self-promoter -- when a proven dud like Norman Mailer, weary of comparing himself to Hemingway, now courts the Nobel Prize which, one can safely say, is just about what he deserves -- in such an age, the artistic self-effacement of Brian Moore is refreshing. It is also tantalizing. Who is the author of these novels in which Catholics regularly lose their faith? All we need really know is that they are stories of rare integrity in which, as Graham Greene rightly observed, the author does not intrude. It is difficult to imagine his characters acting otherwise than as they do, however surprising their acts may seem.

His first novel is told from several viewpoints, not only that of

Judith Hearne, but when the heroine is on stage the reader becomes an unmarried shabby-genteel Irishwoman in her early forties desperate and tipsy because life is passing her by. Ten years later, in *I Am Mary Dunne* (1966), Moore wrote a first-person novel through the viewpoint of his title character, yet at no time is the reader conscious of what a remarkable *tour de force* this is. *The Temptation of Eileen Hughes* (1981) proved that this uncanny capacity to occupy the female psyche is a matter of art, not luck.

It was the futuristic novella *Catholics* (1972), which became a very effective teleplay with Martin Sheen, that made Moore's fiction known to many -- though, in the manner of television, more or less anonymously; after all, he was only the author. The story has all the Brian Moore staples as well as a treatment only he could have provided. The contrast between the old Church of Muck Abbey -- the Albanesian Order reappears in Moore's latest novel -- and Father Kinsella, on a mission from the World Council of Churches to inquire into the strange orthodoxy of the monks, seems to promise one kind of story, but we get something quite different from the conflict of old and new. The only conflicts Brian Moore is genuinely interested in are within the soul, and they concern the person and his faith, or lack of it.

In *Black Robe* (1985) and *The Color of Blood* (1987), Moore returned to the troubled cleric, in the former a French Jesuit missionary to the Hurons, in the latter a contemporary Eastern European Cardinal. But

the familiarity of the theme should not blind us to the truly virtuoso performances in these novels.

Brian Moore's reader, one who has followed his novels over the years, might reasonably assume that the author is a disenchanting lapsed Catholic. But he might with equal reasonableness assume that the author is one whose Catholicism has never lost him. Whatever the biographical truth, the artistic truth is that the imagination of Brian Moore is inseparable from Roman Catholicism. In that sense, surely, he is a Catholic author and one of enormous power and achievement.