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Golden spark, little saint

by [William Jay Smith](#)

Although she had been writing and publishing for more than forty years, Hannah Green left behind her an extremely small body of work when she died in 1996 shortly before her seventieth birthday. In addition to a few short stories and one children's book, it consists of a novel, *The Dead of the House*, and *Little Saint*, which her publisher has aptly called "part celebration, part biography, part prayer, as well as an ode to joy, life, death, and the transcendent." It centers around the life and legend of Saint Foy, a twelve-year-old girl martyred in 303, and the village of Conques in the south of France, where her bones, enshrined, constitute the "golden spark" that drew pilgrims to it for centuries and that still animates the life of its present inhabitants.

Hannah Green grew up in Glendale, near Cincinnati, Ohio, and spent her summers in northern Michigan on the Old Mission Peninsula of Grand Traverse Bay. *The Dead of the House*, a moving evocation of her childhood in those places, found many delighted readers when it was published by Doubleday in 1972. Thomas Lask called it "a delicate and lovely novel, a work of recovery—something to shore the spirit against the ruins," and Richard Ellmann said that reading it was like falling in love: "I was, for as long as it took, able to surrender my own callousness and smugness to the ecstasy that is fiction, that is art." When Jeannette Watson of Books and Co., New York's once preeminent bookstore, and Jonathan Rabinowitz of Turtle Point Press, a small literary press specializing in valuable forgotten fiction, decided to launch a joint imprint, both made lists of the ten books they wanted most to see revived. *The Dead of the House* was at the top of each list. Their new edition appeared in 1995.

In *Little Saint*, to which she devoted the last twenty years of her life, Hannah Green explains that she and her husband, the painter John Wesley, like her a Protestant and "a stranger to saints," traveled in the spring of 1975 to Conques in the southern French mountains of the Rouergue. In this remote and ancient place of pilgrimage, she was given through Saint Foy "the gift of seeing into that zone which has been held sacred since the beginning of human consciousness." Almost at once she began to set down a record of this gift and of the place that offered it.

When one of the villagers guesses that she plans to make him a character in her book, she says that he had understood in a flash of intuitive perception that

what I was writing was in no sense detached history or art history or hagiography or a romance set in the Middle Ages, but something more like a novel, a literary work, drawing on details that, I hoped, would bring present-day Conques to life as the work revolved around its mysterious central presence: Saint Foy.

Hannah Green was not the first writer to visit this secluded village and to fall under its spell. Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870) visited it in 1836 as Inspector General of Historical Monuments and was appalled by the state into which one of the most beautiful Romanesque churches in France had fallen after the Revolution. It is thanks to him that we owe its restoration.

Saint Foy, or Fides (“Faith”), clearly lived up to her name. She was born in 290 at Agen, in southwestern France. Less than thirteen years later, when she refused to renounce her Christian faith, she was betrayed by her own father, roasted on a brazen bed, and finally beheaded. In 866, during the Norman invasion, her bones, which had been carefully guarded for four-hundred years in a church above Agen, were transferred to Conques. There her reliquary statue, richly embellished by gold and precious stones during the Middle Ages, made the village one of the principal stops for pilgrims on the way to St. James of Compostela in Spain. For three-hundred years, during the religious wars, the treasure lay buried beneath the stones of the church. When the Germans came in World War II, it was again hidden. Count von Metternich saved it by reporting to Hitler that the treasure had so deteriorated that it was not worth bothering about.

St. Foy had a wide following in France, to which numerous place names and churches today attest. Her fame spread also to Italy and Spain and eventually to South America. Twenty-three ancient English churches are consecrated to her, and, in London, Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s Cathedral both contain St. Faith chapels. But Conques was, and remains, the sacred center, around which the wheel of her story “with its thousand starry spokes” turns.

Conques (the name derives from the Latin *concha*, conch shell or shell-like vessel, in this case, a deep and sheltered place in the mountains) is a town of fewer than two-hundred year-round inhabitants, but hundreds of tourists come every summer to gaze on its famous statue. The little figure, less than three feet high, has a head much larger than its thin body. The head, dating probably from the fourth century, is thought to have been that of a late laurel-crowned Roman Emperor and is made of gold repoussé laid over with gold leaf. Some viewers today find in the figure’s rigidity and in its sombre fixed gaze something of the mystery and solemnity of certain Egyptian statues.

“*Pas beau,*” a young child is heard to exclaim.

“*Barbare,*” a well-dressed Frenchman intones.

“Hideous,” says an indignant English woman.

But Hannah Green felt that Saint Foy imbues the antique head with her own grace and trancelike power and gives it a truly generative artistic force. She senses in it and in the young girl it represents the kind of energy that Henry Adams felt generated by the Virgin Mary, an energy that culminated in the construction of the Cathedral of Chartres in the twelfth century. Green’s book is a prayer and a meditation addressed to Saint Foy and a celebration of that energy. It is at the same time, for her and for the Conquois, a celebration of the simple joy of living, which that energy appears to sanction.

Hannah Green was a runner. She started jogging daily long before it became wise or fashionable to do so. When she entered a room, smiling, bright-eyed and breathless, as if just back from a sprint, she seemed to harbor some delightful secret that she was about to reveal. Her writing has the same quality of breathlessness. *Little Saint* is a breathless book, told nonstop, as if in a trance. Within a twenty-four-hour frame of the town’s life, it is told as stories were once told by bards or storytellers around campfires, all in one sentence as it were, in a circular pattern with constant digressions, a continuing thread, yet seamless in the fabric its intensity creates. She tells her tale as a child might, so filled with excitement that she cannot stop for fear of losing one particle of all the wonder she sets

out to reveal.

On her first visit to Conques, she had laid aside the manuscripts of her “College Days” and “Dreams and Early Memories,” on which she had been working, to put down these lines in the notebook she always carried in a little deerskin Indian bag:

My head sets off in longing, ready for this pilgrimage. The sense of hundreds of years, thousands of pilgrims, footsteps and miles and miles of land, of mountains, of rivers crossed, all with an object—that golden statue, and in it the bones of that young girl who perished centuries before, who perished for her faith, for her pure courage.

But perhaps she did not really lay aside the record of these early dreams and the memories of childhood days in Michigan with the clear summer light of Grand Traverse Bay; she simply reinforced and enlarged them. In her vision she was not just following in the footsteps of all those thousands of pilgrims over the centuries; she was also seeking something deep within herself. Saint Foy, “eternal girl-child, daughter becoming woman, who held the promise of all that is good and beautiful and healing,” became for her, buried within her consciousness, the symbol of her own lost innocence. And her pilgrimage, set forth here with such resonance, is the record of the recovery, in a distant foreign place, of that innocence, a pilgrimage on which she was joined and ably assisted by her husband.

In Wesley’s visionary, odd, and funny Pop Art paintings, off-key colors dominate, and under the ironic flat presentation of comic-strip characters there is a sad childlike search. Of his paintings showing Blondie and Dagwood in an empty house he said: “It is really my house when I was little. Those lamps, those curtains, that chair, they were my house then. It is really my father I am looking for. My father was like Bumstead. He was thin like Bumstead, and he wore a tie to work and when he came home from work he tipped his hat to the neighbors.” As a small child, Wesley found his father dead from a heart attack, his feet protruding from the bathroom door. After this death, his mother sent him for a while to an orphanage. In his painting “Dagwood Wave Dancers,” Wesley seems to have revived his father in a series of Dagwoods dancing happily along on Hokusai waves.

If Conques captivated the writer and the painter, the village was equally captivated by them. For two decades the curly-dark-haired Hannah—“Madame Anna”—and the broad-shouldered fair-haired Jack—*le grand Jack*—were known and loved by everyone. Their acceptance was in itself remarkable because the Aveyronese are a tough and difficult people who have remained conquered and poor but rich in the language and culture that they fought, against all odds, to retain. If with them you take a wrong step, wrong in any way, you are finished, but *les Américains*, in this case, did everything right from the beginning. As a result, the villagers opened their hearts and revealed their innermost secrets.

Paul Klee said once that he wanted to paint like a child but like a wise child. Hannah and Jack in this book come off as wise-childlike observers in a fairytale landscape, a town that was literally a conch, a resonant shell that echoed with the river flowing beneath it and where everything on the hillside was somehow askew and when you entered a house by the attic, you came out through the cellar.

Hannah Green, with a far-seeing innocent but probing gaze, gives us, as Dylan Thomas did in *Under Milkwood*, a lyrical, moving, and at times hilarious evocation of an entire community. “Through our own recovered innocence,” Thoreau writes in *Walden*, “we discover the innocence of our neighbors.” And the Conquois neighbors are all here, emerging in an innocent distillation as if from the conch itself, to dance before our eyes on Hokusai waves—from the saintly learned Père André, who guards the treasure of Saint Foy, to old Monsieur Rémy Montourcy, who is known to one and all as “the Devil.” Erect, gruff, proud, his face aglow from drink, and smelling frequently of urine, he walks up

and down the rue Charlemagne four times a day. He is called “the Devil” not because he is evil in any way, but because his father for years before the turn of the century had played the part of the Devil in a village passion play.

At Wellesley, Hannah Green was a philosophy major, but writing was always her central concern. In retrospect she felt that the most important course she took was a survey of Russian literature in translation with Vladimir Nabokov. She described its profound effect on her in an article, “Mister Nabokov” in 1977 in *The New Yorker*. When one of the villagers discovers that like so many others he is going to have a place in her book, he tells her, sounding, she says, like Mister Nabokov: “It is the details, the divine details that make a work of literature.” And it is indeed the divine details of *Little Little Saint* that make it memorable. The author tells us how the villagers look, how they talk, how they walk, how they smell. She salutes Rosalie’s voice that “comes from the generations of pretty girls watching their sheep or their cows on one mountain while they carried on a charming conversation with the cowherd or the shepherd on the mountain across the valley.” She takes us to Rosalie’s magic garden suspended on a ledge over the town, and seats us at her kitchen table, where we taste with her a salad made with the rich walnut oil from her husband Charlou’s walnut groves and the red wine vinegar from a huge earthen jar behind her woodstove in which she keeps, as an uncle had advised her to, a stick of elderberry bush. In this apple-scented valley where the scalloped stones of the roofs in the evening take on “a sheen like dragonfly wings,” her keen reverent eye misses nothing. The purity of her feeling allows her to set down the legendary life of Saint Foy, however improbable its nature, and the lives of the villagers, all part in their way even now of the polychrome tympanum of the church, which must be viewed, she says, “in time, with eternity shining through.” Like the villagers, her reader also becomes part of the picture as she describes the manuscript pages of the book as “rumped and curled” as they accumulate on her table:

They have been written in ink and then typed and written over with ink. I cross out, compress, correct, add things, and think of more things and note them, and type it all up again, over and over, often thinking of something more as I type.

Hannah Green continued in this fashion for twenty years until she had gathered what she saw as a three-volume work. She still seemed unwilling to let go of it, and her friends began to wonder if she ever would. Cancer forced her to compress the whole into this single volume that reached her publisher months after her death. It reads as if it had been written non-stop, in a state of rapture, at a single sitting, just as she had hoped it would.

When she first came to Conques, Hannah Green said that reading French was still for her “like trying to make things out through thick mist.” Her exact translation of the many complex French texts throughout the book show that the mist had definitely cleared. She would therefore be acutely unhappy to find the French as presented here studded throughout with misplaced accents, misspellings, and grammatical errors—the single flaw in the perfection for which she strove and one that it is hoped will be corrected in future editions of his powerful and unforgettable book.

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