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### Ron Hansen Rates High

Abstract: Reviews the book ‘A Stay Against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction,’ by Ron Hansen.

How often have you picked up a collection of essays written by a novelist whose style you have intensely admired and then been immediately impressed by the range and depth of the topics the essays cover, without simultaneously having been disappointed in the writing style? That phenomenon does not happen often enough to please the reader who enjoys both novels and essays equally, though it is understandable that the creativity sustained by an author of longer works of fiction truncates more naturally to the short story form of fiction, rather than to either poetic forms or to the essay.

Ron Hansen in his collection of essays *Stay Against Confusion*, published in 2001, accomplishes in his use of prose what John James Audubon accomplished with his use of a paintbrush, that is, his style is “exquisitely rendered.” The main thesis, or rather unifying concept of the essays is that the use, expression, and exercise of imagination in the human mind betokens the incarnate God, a suitable position for Hansen to take as Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., Professor of Creative Writing at Santa Clara University.

Hansen’s intellectual incubation within the Jesuit culture began during his high school educational experience and is reflected in some of the essay titles: *Hearing the Cry of the Poor: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador*, *Affliction and Grace: Religious Experience in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*; and *The Pilgrim: Saint Ignatius of Loyola*.

Opinions of other reviewers of *Stay Against Confusion* vary according to the predictable and formulaic editorial biases of the publication in which the review appeared. Bauer, in *Christianity Today*, critiques the book from the point of view that fictionalized secular topics, when Catholicized as opposed to having been Christianized, are somehow less veracious unless the topics are those that deal with the dark side of human nature. Not surprisingly, the following excerpt from Breslin’s review published in *America* concluded that the “other salient fact about Ron Hansen, of course, is that he has made himself into a fine writer of fiction, and these essays alternately wrestle with and celebrate the task of writing out of a clear faith commitment without turning into either an apologist or a hagiographer.”

Gelpi alludes to one of the canons on the subject, Ross Labrie's *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*, when referring to Hansen's work prior to 1999. In addition to the writers included by Labrie, Gelpi points out that as a professor using Labrie's text, he has "taught some writers not included ...Jack Kerouac ...and Ron Hansen." The eccentric, for which Ron Hansen harbors an evident fondness for and affinity with, is expressed by his selection of topics included in *Stay Against Confusion: Stigmata*; and *A Nineteenth-Century Man*. Like in his longer fiction, Ron Hansen ranges in subjects from the American frontier to medieval myth, creating a unique oeuvre that has been referred to as 'American realism.'

*Stay Against Confusion*, ripe as it is pithy with relevant references and allusions to western European literary classics, whets the intellect's appetite for more learning via the venue of literature. This book would, if augmented by readings and references to non-western European writers, serve well as an alternative textbook for a basic college literature or philosophy class or as a catalyst for discussion in other curriculum that covers religion and culture. One of those essay collections that grows in importance over time, this book's inherent quality is in its author's ability to transcend both time and place through the process of clarifying imaginings.

#### Reference List

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