

New Nonfiction from James Warren Boyd: “The Ecstasy of Sister Bernadette”

In seventh grade my Catholic elementary school received a new principal, Sister Bernadette, who strode onto the blacktop that first day like Darth Vader walking down the ramp of an Imperial shuttle. Her determined expression and alert eyes matched her gait, punctuated with her stylish yet sensible thick-heeled, closed-toe pumps. She wore what I would come to know as her signature look: a midnight-blue, knee length, A-line dress trimmed with an immaculate white collar and matching slightly flared cuffs. The fact that she voluntarily chose to wear the now-optional veil long after all but the most senior nuns had abandoned them read radically - conservative.

My experience as a child of the '70s in Southern California was that you could tell a nun's temperament by what she wore. Younger nuns (and some of their older allies) in our parish wore breezy blue polyester separates, tried fervently to be groovy and relevant, and were admirably committed to social justice. Older nuns who wore THE VEIL with matching black or dark blue habits were often mean and more than occasionally violent; they generally, as I saw it, dwelled in the dark recesses of the convent and emerged to discipline and punish.

But it was these same veiled authoritarians who provided the protection I needed as an obviously queer child. In my first weeks after beginning the third grade as a new student, the boy that would become my nemesis, David, stole my thick tortoiseshell glasses, wearing them in the back pockets of his blue corduroy uniform pants, and taunting “Yeah, try to catch me, butt-face.” I was an easy mark; in part because I started 1st grade a year early, I was always the youngest and

frequently the shortest in my class. Most damningly, though, I was nelly: one of those little boys with neither the ability nor the inclination to butch it up to avoid ridicule. My parents—my mother, consumed by guilt for the queer son she thought she was responsible for creating, and my father emotionally checked out and gone a good part of the year for business—weren't much help. As a family, we seemed to be universally ashamed rather than outraged about my being bullied, convinced somehow that I or we had brought this social embarrassment upon ourselves.

Sr. Bernadette, fortunately for me, ignored and missed nothing. As we filed back to class after early-morning assembly, she witnessed one of the boys in David's posse hit another student on the back of the head simply because he was standing in front of him. Sr. Bernadette pulled both boys out of line, got our attention, and shouted in exasperation, "*This* boy," pointing at the attacker, "just HIT *this* boy," pointing at the victim, "for *no reason*. What is WRONG with you people??!!"

My admiration and respect for Sr. Bernadette deepened in her duties as the English instructor for the advanced class of our grade. While other students complained about grammar drills, essay revision, and impromptu verbal quizzes on irregular verb tenses, I savored them. I relished the diagramming of sentences, especially ones that had incredibly long phrases and clauses of Sr. Bernadette's own creation with their compound subjects, transitive verbs, overly-modified nouns, appositives, and riots of prepositional phrases. I found those graphic organizers with their sideways houses and attached ladders beautiful landscapes of thought and syntax.



I think my enthusiasm for writing and grammar put me in Sr. Bernadette's good graces, which was a blessing since she proved immune to my usual sycophantic ploys. Fortunately, she

seemed to dislike David and his clan of bullies as much or more than I did—if this were possible. Plus, although clearly a bit of a jock herself, who unlike me seemed as comfortable on an athletic field as in the classroom, she didn't seem overly impressed by David's athletic abilities. She was actually *helpful* to students like me who needed a bit of coaching (since our school had no PE teachers), and sometimes spontaneously joined us on the field and blacktop to participate and instruct.

On one such occasion she offered to be the pitcher for our kickball game. I think she enjoyed expertly fulfilling the variety of polite pitching requests from the kickers (e.g. "slow giant bouncies, please" or "fast baby bouncies. please"). Sr. Mary Bernadette even did some fielding in her dress, veil, and pumps, deftly catching fly balls and scooping up grounders while she pitched for both teams. When it was David's turn, a tense hush fell over players on and off the field; we all knew that mortal enemies were facing off. David took his time getting to the plate, trying to unnerve Sr. Mary Bernadette with his swaggering, lackadaisical lope. Despite this, her, face-framed by a few wisps of hair which has escaped the side her veil—remained unchanged; in fact, her polite half-smile may have increased slightly at the corners like a Grinch grin. Her thick dark eyebrows remained neutral, her forehead unfurrowed. Her body was still, save the slow rotation of her neck which allowed her gaze to follow David to the plate; her steely stare focused on David like a panther stalking prey. When he finally arrived at the plate and looked up from the dirt at her with a smirk, the corners of her half smile quivered ever so slightly.

"How would you like your pitch?" Sr. Bernadette asked evenly. She took a breath, and rolled the ball as requested with perfect accuracy. David watched the incoming pitch: as it neared, he rocked back on a crepe heel of his brown suede Wallabee knockoffs before taking a few leaning stutter steps

toward the red rubber ball and kicking it with all his might using the inside of his foot. His kick bulleted on the ground toward Sr. Bernadette. Despite its great speed and a weird, high bounce, she caught the ball confidently above her head with a resounding, "thwap." We held our breath as she lowered her arms, the ball now firmly gripped in a single hand, and looked at a gaping David. She arched one eyebrow and waited for him to run. David trotted towards first, haltingly, eyes locked with hers; then he broke their gaze and sprinted. Sr. Bernadette cocked her arm with the ball back slowly, seemingly wanted to draw out David's cringing as he ran, and when David caught her eye directly across from her, she launched the ball like a trebuchet, hitting David so hard he stumbled with its impact.

Amidst the cheers from those outside of David's retinue, Sr. Bernadette walked back to the mound with a laugh we had never heard. Her subtle, sardonic chuckle was familiar, but this was an unbridled, throaty laugh from deep within. She lifted her face sightly to the sun in elation for a brief moment, her veil tipping back, punctuating her ecstasy. When she arrived at the mound she had regained her composure, and she turned toward David who had returned to the sidelines and asked, "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," David groused, rubbing his shoulder.

Sr. Bernadette nodded at him, and then scanned the field to see who had the ball. She made a beckoning motion to the student, and caught the throw in the air solidly with one hand.

She smiled and scanned David's team, "Who's next?"

Years later I went to visit Sr. Bernadette at the motherhouse on a trip to see family and friends in Southern California. I waited in the quiet, immaculate, oddly corporate-feeling

lobby, until she strode around the corner, and exclaimed brightly, "James Boyd!" She seemed only a bit older, and I realized at that point how young she must have been when she became our principal. Gone was her signature habit-esque dress replaced with business casual separates. Gone too was the veil; she had combed-back salt and pepper hair in a short, flattering style. We exchanged hellos (my recollection is that we shook hands) and she invited me to sit with her. I asked her if she remembered our class, and she said, diplomatically, we were "a difficult class but at least we had energy." The classes who came after us, she said, were "hard to get to do anything."

As she reminisced, I looked into her eyes—framed now with soft wrinkles—still marked with a fierce intelligence, eyes that never missed a bully's blacktop trick. But gone was the sternness I surmise was necessary as a school administrator who valued order and fairness. What was in abundance now was the once rarely seen glint of approval she gave students when a verb was conjugated or a sentence diagrammed correctly. And in the corner of her eyes as we sat evaluating each other anew was something I hadn't seen or noticed as a child: a playful glint.

She asked about me. I told her I had moved to San Francisco and was pursuing a master's degree in English. I told her that one of the reasons for my visit was to thank her for being the person who first got me to love the subject.

"I'm happy to hear that," she replied with a smile, "You know, I'm not teaching anymore."

"Really? Why not?" I think my expression might have revealed how unfathomable I thought this was, since in my mind she was *the* English teacher.

"A few years ago, the order needed someone to be the accountant and I stepped up to do it."

“Do you like it?” I asked.

She shrugged, “One of us needed to do it.”

After a few more moments of conversation, she stood up and extended her hand again. “Well, good luck to you, James,” she said, shaking my hand, “and good luck with your studies.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Nice to see you.”

Sr. Bernadette squeezed my shoulder maternally and gave me a warm, genuine half smile before she turned and walked out of the reception area without looking back, her footsteps echoing in emptiness and deafening quiet.

I stood still for a moment in the vestibule—not wanting to move or make a noise, not wanting that pause after to end—before exiting the motherhouse to my car. As I walked, I wondered what she thought of these periodic visits of the adult specters of children past. What must it be like to meet her historic fan base, surely the former students most motivated to visit? I regret that I didn’t ask her if she, too, remembered that sunny afternoon on the kickball field when she transformed into a superhero.