

Dear James

Introduction

Joan Wester Anderson

I used to teach an adult education class called “How to Get Published.” I gave tips about freelancing, but most of all I emphasized the importance of being willing to write daily, even if not “in the mood,” and to accept professional criticism, rejection, or suggestions for revisions with appreciation and a lack of ego. Inevitably, in every class, there was at least one student with breathtaking potential. Someone who could write rings around the rest of us but who also, I suspected, would never be published. The reason: an unwillingness to do the hard work of revision. “I like it the way it is,” would be the student’s argument—and his ultimate downfall.

How I wish I knew about Jon Hassler then. What an example his struggles would have been for my students!

Hassler was born and grew up in the remote and freezing plains of northern Minnesota, where weather and isolation teach the hardy residents to depend on one another because they must. (Perhaps Garrison Keiller’s fictional Lake Wobegon, “where the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average” paints as familiar a portrait as any.) A beloved only child, whose mother had an eye for life’s quirky elements and often called them to her son’s attention, Hassler eventually became a high school English teacher. As a young adult, he taught in one Minnesota town after another as he became a husband and father of three and worked to complete his master’s degree. “Nobody ever recommended I write,” he commented offhandedly in a later interview. Yet, at age forty, when he could ignore this quiet desire no longer, he bought himself a notebook. And despite his crammed schedule (he was now a college English professor and coping with what had become a difficult marriage), he spent the next five years writing, rewriting, and collecting an astonishing eighty-five rejection slips from literary journals, with a scant six stories accepted for publication. As one who often wrote in the

midst of family chaos, crashes and screams, my mind boggles. From where does someone in Hassler's situation carve the hours, the vigor, the determination to follow his dream with little or no external support?

Hassler makes no secret of the answer—for if the frigid north honed and strengthened him physically, his love for the God he knew through the Catholic Church bore him spiritually toward the success he ultimately achieved. Hassler's own belief that his writing was a holy mission, that each of us serves God best by using the talents he has given us, convinced him to keep trying. A literary agent coming across one of those six published stories eventually opened doors to book authorship.

Hassler's first book, *Staggerford*, published in 1977, introduced readers to the small Minnesota town that has become the background for most of his work. Everyone who has lived or spent time in a small, typically Christian-based community will recognize Staggerford's charm and the classic characters who inhabit it. Most are kindly, but there are always a few troublemakers who deliberately stir up placid waters, spread gossip, and otherwise help to further the action. These characters are out in force in *Dear James*, published in 1993.

Newcomers to Jon Hassler's fiction can start with any of his books. Since all his novels have common elements, one can pick up *Dear James*, for example, and quickly "catch up," flowing easily into the tide of whimsy, plot, and observations both humorous and touching. For example, the primary character in *Dear James* is Agatha McGee, a spinster and a starchy but beloved parish grade-school teacher, who struggles to hang on to her beliefs as changes in the church and culture swirl about her. In her earlier appearance in *A Green Journey*, Agatha met a kindred soul, James O'Hannon of Ballybegs, Ireland, via a letters-to-the-editor column, and began a transatlantic correspondence with him. The two initially connected through their concerns over the state of the post-conciliar church. Ultimately, their communication became more personal and, for Agatha at least, deepened into an unacknowledged love. Impulsively she traveled to County Kildare to meet her soul mate in the flesh. But her surprise went terribly wrong, for she discovered that James was a Catholic priest ready for retirement, facing his later years as a staunch celibate but also longing for a close (albeit platonic) relationship that up till now had been denied him.

Shocked and humiliated, Agatha fled for the shelter of Staggerford, only to discover that the diocese was closing her cherished St. Isadore's Elementary School. What would she do with the rest of her life? A despairing Agatha, at seventy, saw only loneliness ahead.

Now, as *Dear James* begins, she has continued to write to James as a way of venting and sharing—but has torn up each letter instead of mailing it. She will not breach the barriers now between them; to do so would

be scandalous! James, on the other hand, has found a new ministry and a unique way to be useful during his remaining years. He longs to share these ideas with Agatha. James is devastated that he wounded her by his cowardly refusal to inform her of his priesthood; he now writes to her frequently, undaunted by her refusal to answer, hopeful that she will relent.

Like the Staggerford novels, the popularity of Jan Karon's best-selling Mitford novels—which are set in a small town, feature a clergyman, Father Tim, and are spiritually flavored—and other similarly themed series seems to indicate a yearning among many American readers for more hopeful and uplifting books. But for Catholics, there may be more to the Staggerford series' popularity than that. *Dear James* covers familiar ecclesiastical landscape; we've been there, we've asked the questions about celibacy, female priests, and sacrifice versus good works; we've debated the appropriateness of liturgical "reforms," and we've even experienced the same minor frustrations that the Staggerford community faces. ("Call me Dick," says the new bishop, which drives Agatha up the wall.) Wisely, Hassler makes no attempt to "sell" a certain position or turn ordinary conversation into personal treatises; instead, he simply tells the story, which results in a pleasant intimacy—we could be sitting around our own dining room tables having these same conversations. We probably have.

Another charming aspect here is the respect shown to the elderly. Today, seniors are often portrayed as illness-ridden, perhaps crotchety, and definitely "out of tune." But ask any seventy-year-old what age she feels on the inside, and she's likely to say, "thirty-five or forty." People like Agatha and James are losing their physical strength but have not changed all that much in spirit—and from this realization comes a certain comfort. *Dear James* also includes examples of intergenerational friendships, again typical in a small-town environment. Agatha's relationship with a mentally exhausted Vietnam veteran is especially touching. And it is a small sleeping boy, his face nestled comfortably in Agatha's lap, who will open the door to her next great journey. Soon she will understand, as James already does, that God is the great Recycler, that none of our experiences are ever wasted, and that he will make the wholeness of a new life out of broken pieces of the old—as long as we are willing to offer those pieces to him.

Hassler knows this well. For the past eleven years he has been ill with a little-known Parkinson's-like disease that, although he can still write about three hours a day, has weakened his vision, voice, and gait. He falls often, and actually does better riding a bicycle than attempting to walk. However, he is still adding to a body of work that includes twenty fiction and nonfiction works; one of his novels was made into a television movie and several others have been produced as plays. (Hassler continues the adventures of Agatha McGee in his most recent

novel, *The New Woman*.) How many bouts of depression has Hassler overcome to continue to find meaning in his work? How many times did he wonder what God possibly had in mind? How many rewrites did his own life require?

We'll probably never know. Despite an obvious inner discipline, Hassler today seems self-effacing and humble, with the same gentle wit we find in his fiction, not prone to complaints or arrogance. His effort has no doubt been a hidden one. But oh! How I wish my students had recognized it.

Joan Wester Anderson's sixteen books include Where Angels Walk, The Power of Miracles, and In the Arms of Angels. She lives in Prospect Heights, Illinois.