

SILVER CURRENT PRESS

Criticism & Craft

Essays

Book Club Companion

Discussion Questions and a Critical Essay on the Eight Essays of James Mulhern

First Edition

James Mulhern

authorjamesmulhern.com

ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

About This Collection

Essays: Criticism & Craft collects eight short pieces that read James Mulhern's fiction, poetry, and teaching the way a careful reader would — following a single image or conviction across stories, poems, and the classroom until it declares its own logic. The collection has a deliberate architecture. Five essays are close readings written in the critical third person: two trace recurring imagery (fire, water), one names the governing method behind the whole body of work, one is a scholarly reading of a single story against Catholic doctrine, and one traces the sacrament of communion across the fiction, the poems, and the classroom. Three essays drop the critical distance and speak in the author's own voice — a working philosophy of craft, a short credo, and a meditation on writing itself as a form of communion.

Read in the order the author intended — *Unquenchable Fire*; *Water, and What It Carries*; *The Sacred in the Shabby*; *Altogether Beautiful*; *Communion in the Work*; *A Working Philosophy*; *Credo*; *Writing as Communion* — the collection builds a single, cumulative case rather than eight independent observations. The two imagery essays establish that ordinary elements (flame, tide) carry theological weight without ever being named as symbols. The method essay names the mechanism directly: the sacred arrives disguised as the shabby, never announced. The scholarly essay tests that mechanism against a single keystone story, “Assumptions,” and a specific dogma, the Assumption of Mary. The communion essay widens the claim from one story to the whole corpus — fiction, poems, and the classroom alike. And the three essays in the author's own voice step back from the fiction to state, without any critical apparatus, the beliefs the first five essays had to infer from evidence.

A note on the essays' origin and use: all eight are original, unpublished-elsewhere criticism and personal statement, written to accompany the fiction and poetry rather than to stand entirely apart from it. Discussion leaders and solitary readers alike will get the most from this companion by keeping a copy of “Assumptions” (from *Assumptions and Other Stories*) and “Teaching at Fifty-Six” (originally published in *The Font: A Literary Journal for Language Teachers*) close at hand, since both texts are quoted at length across the collection and anchor most of its central claims.

How to Read This Collection — Alone or in a Group

A collection of criticism and personal essay asks something different of a reading group than a novel or a book of poems does. There is no plot to summarize and no character to argue about; there is instead a claim, built essay by essay, that a group can either test against the primary texts or simply take on faith. Resist the second option. The essays are built entirely out of verbatim quotation — do not let a discussion proceed on the essay's paraphrase of a passage when the actual sentence from “Assumptions,” “Teaching at Fifty-Six,” or the poems is one search away.

A workable structure for a single session: read “The Sacred in the Shabby” and “A Working Philosophy” back to back, since the first names the method as a critic sees it and the second names it as the author experiences it from the inside. Ask the group to identify where the two accounts agree and where the author's own description turns out to be more modest, or more uncertain, than the critical essay's confidence about his intentions. Then move either forward (into the fire and water imagery, then the doctrinal reading in “Altogether Beautiful”) or backward (into “Credo” and “Writing as Communion,” which read like a distillation of everything the first six essays argue on the author's behalf).

A solitary reader will get more from the collection by resisting the urge to read all eight essays in one sitting. Because the same handful of images — the housedress, the tanning oil, the pelican, the narrow doorway — recur across every essay, reading them close together can make the whole collection feel repetitive rather than cumulative. Spacing them out, and rereading the relevant page of “Assumptions” before each essay, restores the sense that each piece is testing the same claim against new evidence rather than simply repeating it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discussion Questions

I. Recurring Imagery — Fire, Water, and Communion

Unquenchable Fire · Water, and What It Carries · Communion in the Work

1. “Unquenchable Fire” argues that Mulhern takes scripture’s standing image for eternal punishment — “the fire that never shall be quenched” (Matthew 3:12, Mark 9:43) — and “hands it to the sun on the water, at the exact moment two women are walking into the sea to be cured.” Do you find the reversal earned by the essay’s evidence, or does it feel imposed on the story from outside? What would change about your reading of “Assumptions” if you had never read this essay?
2. The essay notices that the family’s surname, Fleming, contains the word “flame,” and adds: “Mulhern does not remark on the pun anywhere in the text; he simply lets the reader arrive at it.” Is an unremarked pun a more or less persuasive piece of evidence than an explicit quotation? What is the difference between a critic finding meaning an author placed there and a critic finding meaning an author did not consciously intend?
3. “Water, and What It Carries” claims water in Mulhern’s work “is not the medium of the miracle” but “the medium of tending.” The essay supports this with the Nantasket cure that fails to arrive from the water itself, the rained-on windowpane in “Honeymoon,” and a dying dog’s “bloody urine” in “Moving Forward.” Which of these three examples makes the essay’s case most convincingly, and which feels like the weakest link in the argument?
4. “Communion in the Work” identifies the medieval “pelican-in-her-piety” emblem inside a children’s explanation in *Give Them Unquiet Dreams* — “a mother pelican will wound herself, striking her breast with her beak to feed the babies” — and calls it “not folklore invented for the scene” but standard Eucharistic iconography “carved into altar rails and stitched into vestments for centuries.” Does knowing the emblem’s history change how the passage reads to you, or does the passage work just as well as a fact about birds?
5. The same essay reaches for a specific piece of Catholic sacramental theology — *ex opere operato*, grace “valid by the act itself rather than the merit of its minister” — to

explain why Helen's cruelty toward Peg (the invented nickname "Lovely Peggy," the eye-rolling) does not cancel the tenderness of leading her into the water. Do you accept the essay's claim that care can coexist with cruelty in the same gesture without contradiction? Where in your own experience has that proven true or false?

6. All three imagery essays insist their subject "never announces itself" and must instead "be noticed on the way past." If an image has to be pointed out by a critic before a reader notices it, has the author's technique succeeded or failed? Discuss with reference to at least one image from each essay.

II. Method and Doctrine — The Sacred and the Scholarly Reading

The Sacred in the Shabby · Altogether Beautiful

1. "The Sacred in the Shabby" states its thesis in one sentence: "the sacred is never announced, only smuggled in wearing the clothes of something shabby." The essay insists this "is not irony" but a claim that "the sacred was always going to look this way" for the people Mulhern writes about. Do you agree that dressing the sacred down is different from mocking it? What is at stake in that distinction for a reader who does not share the author's faith?

2. The essay draws a direct line from the fiction to the classroom, quoting "Teaching at Fifty-Six" on students who "contain multitudes" and possess "a sacred self deep inside," met with the reported classroom response, "This ain't math, Mr." Why might an essay about religious imagery in short fiction end on a scene from a classroom instead of a scene from a story? What does the classroom example prove that another story could not?

3. "Altogether Beautiful" reads the story's title as carrying two meanings at once — the small, lowercase cruelty of a family's assumptions about Peg, and the capitalized Catholic doctrine of the Assumption of Mary. Before reading this essay, which meaning of the title had occurred to you, if either? Does a title doing double work this deliberately change how you read everything that follows it?

4. The essay argues that granting Peg — "alcoholic, diabetic, asthmatic, gouty, bald, mocked at her own family's card table" — the imagery reserved by doctrine for a sinless body is "a quiet rebuttal of merit as the precondition for glory." Is this a religious claim, a

moral claim, or both at once? Must a reader accept the theology to feel the force of the argument?

5. “Altogether Beautiful” calls the story’s conclusion “a kind of unauthorized hagiography: sainthood’s visual signature, granted without sainthood’s credentials.” Whom does this phrase indict, if anyone — the Church’s narrow criteria for sainthood, the family that mocked Peg, or no one at all? Discuss whether the essay is making an argument about doctrine or simply describing what the story does with it.

6. Read together, these two essays move from a general method (the sacred hides in the shabby) to a single, doctrinally exact test case (Peg’s body measured against the Assumption). What is gained by narrowing the claim this way in the second essay? What, if anything, is lost by narrowing a whole body of work down to one story and one dogma?

III. Craft and Belief — In the Author’s Own Words

A Working Philosophy · Credo · Writing as Communion

1. “A Working Philosophy” opens by insisting the philosophy “arrived the way most working philosophies do — backwards, out of a classroom.” Does the essay’s claim that theory follows practice, rather than the reverse, change how you read the more confident critical claims made in the essays that precede it in the collection?

2. The essay states, “Sentimentality, as I understand it, is what happens when a writer flinches from the actual body in front of them. Compassion is what happens when the writer keeps looking.” Test this distinction against a specific passage in “Assumptions” that catalogs Peg’s afflictions. Does the cataloging read to you as compassion, sentimentality, or something the essay’s own framework does not quite capture?

3. “Credo” is built as a sequence of parallel statements, each beginning “I believe.” Which single belief in the credo do you find the most persuasive as a standalone claim about how to live, independent of anything else in the collection? Which one depends most heavily on having already read the fiction to make sense?

4. The credo states: “I believe grace does not wait for worthy people to administer it. It travels through cruelty, exhaustion, and bad temper as readily as through kindness.” Compare this directly to the *ex opere operato* argument in “Communion in the Work.” Is

the credo simply restating the critical essay's conclusion in plainer language, or does it go further than the critical essay was willing to claim?

5. "Writing as Communion" proposes three separate communions: between writer and page, between writer and subject, and between finished page and an unmet reader. Which of the three feels most true to your own experience of either writing or reading? Is there a fourth communion — between a reader and a book club, perhaps — that the essay leaves out?

6. The essay closes: "Teaching was the pond I said I bathed in each morning. Writing, I have come to understand, is the larger water that pond empties into." Trace the image of water from this final sentence back to "Water, and What It Carries" at the start of the collection. Does the collection's final image of water resolve or complicate the essay written about water at the beginning?

For Further Conversation

1. The collection is organized so that five essays observe from the outside and three speak from the inside. Choose one claim made by an outside essay (for example, that the sacred “is never announced”) and test it against the corresponding inside essay (“A Working Philosophy” says the author discovers meaning through revision rather than plans it in advance). Do the outside and inside accounts agree, or does the author’s own description undercut the critic’s confidence?
2. “The Religious Architecture of James Mulhern’s Work: The Complete Study,” referenced at the close of “Altogether Beautiful,” claims to document “more than seven hundred individually verified passages” of religious imagery across the whole body of work. Does a claim of that scale strengthen the collection’s argument, or does it risk finding a pattern so large it could be read into almost any sufficiently attentive body of writing? Where would you draw the line between a genuine recurring architecture and confirmation bias in a sympathetic critic?
3. Every essay in the collection insists that dignity, grace, and the sacred are not conditional on being presentable, worthy, or impressive. Discuss whether this is ultimately a religious claim, a democratic or humanist one, or simply a working method for a fiction writer interested in overlooked people. Does the argument require Catholic doctrine specifically, or could the same case be built from a different tradition, or none at all?
4. If you were assigning these eight essays to a reader who had never encountered Mulhern’s fiction or poetry, would you recommend beginning with the imagery essays, the scholarly essay, or the author’s own statements of belief? Defend your ordering.

A companion to criticism should not try to settle the questions the essays raise — it should widen the number of ways the collection can be tested. Leave room in the conversation for a reader who finds the religious reading overstated, and for the possibility that an image you found obvious on first reading turns out, on the second, to be carrying more weight than either the essay or the story ever states outright.

ESSAY

The Argument Beneath the Argument

How Eight Essays Build One Case

Read separately, the eight essays that make up this collection look like eight different projects: two studies of recurring imagery, one statement of critical method, one piece of religious scholarship, one wide-angle essay on sacrament, and three short personal statements. Read in sequence, they resolve into a single argument, built with the patience of a case rather than the immediacy of a thesis statement. What follows traces that argument essay by essay, with the collection's own quotations doing the demonstrating.

I. The Method Stated Twice

The collection's clearest thesis sentence arrives early, in "The Sacred in the Shabby": "the sacred is never announced, only smuggled in wearing the clothes of something shabby." The essay is careful to distinguish this from irony — "Mulhern is not deflating the sacred by dressing it down" — and grounds the claim in specific transpositions: "A crown of thorns arrives as a laurel of peach-fuzz hair. The stigmata arrive as spilled juice." That is the critic's account of the method, arrived at from outside, by inference from the pattern of the prose.

The same method gets a second, independent statement three essays later, this time from inside the process. "A Working Philosophy" describes the identical habit without any of the critical vocabulary: "My habit, which I did not choose so much as discover I already had, is to place the ordinary and the unspeakable in the same paragraph." Where the critical essay calls this smuggling, the author calls it a habit he discovered rather than designed. The two accounts do not contradict each other — they corroborate each other from opposite directions, which is precisely the kind of evidence a collection built on inference needs. A method a critic infers and an author independently confirms, in different language and without evident coordination between the two accounts, is stronger evidence than either account alone.

II. Fire Reversed

“Unquenchable Fire” applies the method to a single scriptural phrase. Scripture’s standing image for punishment without end — “the fire that never shall be quenched” — becomes, at the climax of “Assumptions,” “the waves beyond glimmer[ing] like sparks from an unquenchable fire” at the exact moment two women wade into the sea to be healed. The essay calls this “the single boldest move in a story built almost entirely out of such reversals,” and demonstrates that the story rehearses the reversal three times before committing to it — in the “red seas” of an old woman’s cheeks, in a hedge of gorse standing in for a burning bush, in a family’s reproduction of a Titian whose “most vivid colors are orange and red, shades of fire, flesh and blood.” By the time the sea itself catches fire, the essay argues, the story has already taught its reader how to read flame as glory rather than warning.

III. Water Withheld and Water Given

“Water, and What It Carries” performs the same operation on the collection’s other master element, and reaches an almost opposite conclusion about how it works. Where fire announces itself with a single dramatic reversal, water “is almost never grand” and “does not part or flood or drown anyone in a single dramatic stroke.” The essay’s central move is to show that the Nantasket cure the family drives toward never actually arrives from the water: “The cure... does not come from the water. It comes from the Son, after death.” Water’s real function, the essay argues, is demonstrated instead in smaller, unglamorous instances — ointment worked into a mother’s heel while “the rain outside taps a pane,” a dying dog’s “bloody urine” refused any softening. The essay’s conclusion states plainly what distinguishes the two elements: fire in this body of work reveals, all at once, at a climax; water tends, continuously, without ever asking to be noticed. Reading the two imagery essays together — rather than as isolated studies of two unrelated images — is how the collection first demonstrates that its method produces not one trick but a whole vocabulary, capable of doing different work with different elements.

IV. The Doctrine Behind the Title

“Altogether Beautiful” narrows the collection’s wide-angle claims about method and imagery into a single, doctrinally precise test. The essay observes that the story’s title “carries two meanings at once” — a family’s lowercase assumptions about a woman it has already dismissed, and the capitalized Catholic doctrine that Mary “was taken up

body and soul into heavenly glory at the close of her earthly life, spared the ordinary corruption of the grave.” The essay then does the work a scholarly reading requires: it traces the epigraph (Song of Solomon 4:7) through the Marian antiphon *Tota Pulchra Es*, establishes that Catholic doctrine ties the Assumption specifically to Mary’s sinlessness, and shows that the story deliberately gives its climactic imagery — Peg who “shone like a miniature sun,” whose “countenance reflect[s] the brightness of a blazing fire” — to a woman defined on the story’s first page by “alcoholic, diabetic, asthmatic, gouty, bald.” The essay’s own summary of the stakes is exact: “what is glorified here is not purity but a body that has been loved and has suffered.” This is the collection’s most tightly argued claim, because it is the only essay willing to be falsified by a specific doctrinal detail rather than a general impression of religious atmosphere.

V. Grace Without a Worthy Minister

“Communion in the Work” takes the doctrinal precision of the previous essay and widens it back out — from one story to the classroom, the poems, and a second novel. Its evidence ranges from the medieval pelican-in-her-piety emblem hidden inside a children’s explanation in *Give Them Unquiet Dreams* to the front matter of the poems (“My family members are my prayers. My poems are my prayers.”) to the author’s own nonfiction: “a palpable energy (the Holy Spirit?)... This is communion, and teaching will be the pond that I bathe in each morning.” The essay’s theological pivot is its most useful contribution to the whole collection: it borrows the sacramental principle *ex opere operato* — grace “valid by the act itself rather than the merit of its minister” — to explain why Helen’s casual cruelty toward Peg does not cancel the care in the same gesture that leads her into the water. That single borrowed term does more work than any other single move in the collection, because it gives the reader permission to stop expecting the fiction’s characters to be consistently good before their kindness is allowed to count.

VI. Three Communions

“Writing as Communion” takes the sacrament named in the previous essay and relocates it one level further — out of the fiction’s characters and into the act of writing itself. The essay proposes three distinct communions: between writer and page (“I sit down not entirely certain what I mean, and the sentence... tells me”), between writer and subject (“Writing does not preserve the dead so much as it reopens a chair for them”), and between the finished page and an unmet reader (“A poem written out of one family’s grief becomes, on a stranger’s late-night reading, a poem about their own”). This is the

collection's most abstract essay, and also its most exposed — unlike the critical essays, it offers no textual evidence outside the author's own report of his experience, which a skeptical reader is free to accept or decline. That the collection includes an essay this vulnerable, immediately after five essays built on citation and doctrine, is itself a claim: that criticism, however carefully evidenced, eventually has to yield the floor to the plainer, harder-to-verify testimony of the person who did the writing.

VII. Credo as Keystone

“Credo” sits at the collection's center of gravity precisely because it restates, in nine short declarations, every claim the surrounding essays spend paragraphs proving. “I believe a homely woman singing badly in a cellar is closer to the sacred than most things painted on a ceiling” compresses “The Sacred in the Shabby.” “I believe fire is not only a punishment... I believe it is also, in the right light, at the right hour, on the right stretch of ordinary water, the exact material glory is made of” compresses “Unquenchable Fire.” “I believe grace does not wait for worthy people to administer it” compresses the *ex opere operato* argument of “Communion in the Work.” The credo's closing line — “I believe a book, a poem, or a classroom is a place where a person can be told, truthfully, for the first time: you are altogether beautiful, and there is no flaw in you” — returns, deliberately, to the exact Song of Solomon language that gives “Altogether Beautiful” its title, closing the loop the scholarly essay opened. Reading the credo after the five critical essays rather than before them is the collection's best structural decision: it lets a reader arrive at each belief already knowing the specific textual evidence that earned it, rather than taking the belief on the author's word first.

VIII. Conclusion: A Single Argument in Eight Essays

What the collection amounts to, read start to finish, is not eight separate observations about a body of work but one argument tested eight times against different material: that dignity, grace, and the sacred are never conditional on being presentable, worthy, or even consistently kind — and that a writer's only real technique for proving this claim is patient, undramatic attention to the detail most writing would consider beneath its notice. The two imagery essays supply the raw evidence. The method essay names the mechanism. The scholarly essay tests the mechanism against a single doctrine with the rigor that doctrine demands. The communion essay widens the claim across the whole corpus. And the three essays in the author's own voice confirm, from inside the process rather than by inference, that the pattern the critical essays found was not accidental. A

reader does not have to share the collection's Catholic vocabulary to find the underlying claim persuasive — only to accept, provisionally, the collection's recurring wager: that a shabby detail, watched long enough and honestly enough, will eventually tell you what it was carrying the whole time.

Sources

All essays quoted in this companion are published in full on the author's website.

Quotations from "Assumptions" are drawn from the version published in *The Galway Review*; quotations from "Teaching at Fifty-Six" are drawn from the version published in *The Font: A Literary Journal for Language Teachers*.

- [Essays hub — "Essays: Criticism & Craft"](#)
- ["Unquenchable Fire"](#)
- ["Water, and What It Carries"](#)
- ["The Sacred in the Shabby"](#)
- ["Altogether Beautiful"](#)
- ["Communion in the Work"](#)
- ["A Working Philosophy"](#)
- ["Credo"](#)
- ["Writing as Communion"](#)
- ["The Religious Architecture of James Mulhern's Work: The Complete Study"](#)

About the Author

James Mulhern is a Philadelphia-based novelist, poet, essayist, and professor emeritus of English. His writing in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction has appeared in international literary journals and anthologies more than three hundred times. His novels and short story collections — including *Give Them Unquiet Dreams*, *Molly Bonamici*, *A Prayer for Home*, and *Assumptions and Other Stories* — have earned favorable critiques from Kirkus Reviews, including a starred review. In 2015, he was awarded a fully paid Creative Writing Fellowship to the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom, graduating with “Highest Distinction.” That same year, a story of his was longlisted for the Fish Short Story Prize. In 2017, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He has been shortlisted for the Aesthetica Creative Writing Award for poetry, nominated for Best of the Net, and named a Finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction. Two of his novels were Finalists — one a Red Ribbon Winner — for the United Kingdom’s Wishing Shelf Book Awards. His novel *Give Them Unquiet Dreams* is a Readers’ Favorite Book Award winner and was named one of the Best Books of 2019 by Kirkus Reviews. He is the founder of Silver Current Press, a Philadelphia imprint devoted to literary fiction, poetry, and the art of the well-made book, and, after three decades teaching creative writing and literary analysis, now writes and publishes full time as professor emeritus.