

## AN EXAMINED LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF ARTISTIC VISION

a review by  
Heather Bell Adams

Luke Whisnant. *The Connor Project*. Iris Press, 2022.

**HEATHER BELL ADAMS** is the author of the novels *Maranatha Road* (West Virginia University Press, 2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online*, 2019) and *The Good Luck Stone* (Haywire Books 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online Fall 2022*). The author is a recipient of the Doris Betts Fiction Prize, Rose Post Creative Nonfiction Award, Carrie McCray Literary Award, and James Still Fiction Prize. Her work has appeared in *Still: The Journal*, *Raleigh Review*, *Parentheses*, *Atticus Review*, *The Thomas Wolfe Review*, *Broad River Review*, *NCLR*, and elsewhere. Currently serving as North Carolina's 2022 Piedmont Laureate, she lives in Raleigh where she works as a lawyer.

**LUKE WHISNANT** is a Professor of English at East Carolina University. His previous books include the story collection *Down in the Flood* (Iris Press, 2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2007, which also includes a short story by him) and *In the Debris Field* (Ad Hoc Fiction, 2018), which won the 2018 Bath Flash Fiction International Novella-in-Flash Award. He has served on the staff of *Tar River Poetry* since 1985 and as editor since 2006.

Luke Whisnant's new novel, *The Connor Project*, centers around the character of David Connor, a television journalist and visual artist. In some ways a winsome romantic and in others a prickly curmudgeon, Connor has been unlucky in love. Or he's shied away from commitment. Or he's resisted following in his father's footsteps. Perhaps all of the above. The reader is invited to speculate about the source of Connor's discontent by assembling pieces of the puzzle from artfully arranged vignettes told in Whisnant's crisp, muscular prose.

One such vignette reveals that Connor's father stole one of his girlfriends. In another, Connor encounters his sister's girlfriend in the middle of the night and ends up kissing her. "Sure he was sleepwalking" (85), he acknowledges with little shame, only a newfound tenderness for his girlfriend of the moment sleeping nearby. *The Connor Project* spends significant time with the protagonist's girlfriends and sexual partners. In addition, the novel probes Connor's relationships with his sister and parents, as well as his role as an artist.

In his earlier novel, *Watching TV with the Red Chinese* (1992), Whisnant interpolates the narrative with a documentary film transcript. Here, he uses a similar structural device by including the transcript of an oral interview between Connor and the artist documenting his life. In the chapter entitled "On the Street," Connor comes upon a wrecked

motorcycle "like something running fast had been shot down" (46). Although he looks for the missing rider in an attempt to help, he's also struck by the artistic value of the scene and begins filming the wreckage. When the cops find the rider's body, Connor "swore that he had looked, he had looked for a solid five minutes" (50). Bearing some modicum of guilt for not locating the driver in time to save him, Connor nonetheless remains preoccupied with the artistic image of the yellow light on the wet street. Wishing to discuss his horror and "his human failing" (51), despite the late hour, he calls his sister and the woman he'd dropped off earlier after a lackluster date. This scene encapsulates Connor's personality and artistic ethos while speaking to both his loneliness and his tendency to burden others rather than shoulder responsibility for himself.

In this chapter and elsewhere in the novel, Whisnant's sparse setting details suggest a universal landscape and a sort of "everyman" reading of Connor's life. At one point, Connor marries a woman named Hope. Their marriage ends in a poignant candlelit bathtub scene, but otherwise Hope plays a relatively small role in the novel. However, when Connor specifies how long the marriage lasted (two years, four months, and eight days), one wonders if, in his putative nonchalance, he is an unreliable narrator and the loss affected him more deeply

than he has admitted. Given his father's betrayal, Connor is at his most relatable as he grieves his father's last days. Even as he recognizes the futility of art when it comes to life or death, Connor imagines that if he can finish a film project about his father, then his father won't die.

Due to the narrative's non-chronological construction as a series of stories or vignettes, some readers may disagree with calling *The Connor Project* a novel. However, by the end, the well-designed narrative presents a full picture of a life and operates as a cohesive and meaningful whole. Thus, it is reasonable to think of *The Connor Project* as a novel, particularly since such a classification seems to comport with the author's intent. And the closer one examines these carefully crafted pieces, the more treasures they reveal.

There has been much discussion in recent years about whether a protagonist needs to be likable. See, for example, the spirited debate about Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* (2013), another literary novel involving an artist.\* In this vein, one might ask whether David Connor (a white male) is likable. Despite his faults, Connor succeeds as a main character because he is compelling and interesting. His life story remains consistently relatable and, as Whisnant reminds us, Connor's trip down memory lane is not merely for his own benefit but rather in furtherance of another artist's project. At various points

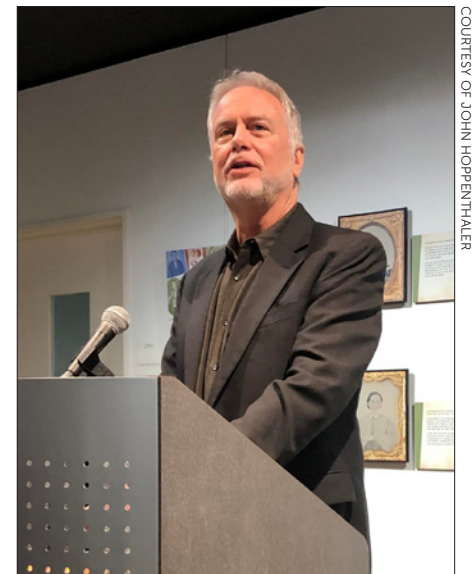
in the narrative when Connor questions whether he has been a "scumbag," his self-awareness engenders empathy.

Although the novel is not told in a strictly chronological format, a sense of forward movement emerges as the story progresses. Far from an aimless exploration, the author takes the reader on a purposeful journey. Ultimately, the destination centers around an art project called "The Connor Project," the exhibition notes for which comprise the novel's epilogue. These notes catalogue each piece in the project, ranging from an acrylic on canvas depicting Connor *in utero* to a mixed media presentation of lettered tiles and photographs of forty-nine of his former girlfriends and lovers, which the viewer can manipulate to arrange alphabetically, chronologically, or by criteria such as eye or hair color. Interspersed with the photographs are blurred shots of mannequin heads. The exhibition notes ask, "is it a comment on his misogyny?" (154). On this question, it bears mentioning that the artist behind "The Connor Project" is revealed to be Connor's current girlfriend, Boo. The fact that she chooses him for her subject lends an added layer of validation, perhaps confirming that the reader's time with Connor has been well-spent.

Another piece in the exhibition, entitled "So Why

Did They Kill Socrates?" (155), raises the specter of Connor's departed father. The reference to Socrates also brings to mind the philosopher's warning that the unexamined life is not worth living. As both art project and novel, *The Connor Project* examines David Connor's life: wryly humorous and bittersweet everyday moments across the decades, representative of his all too human foibles and indefatigable perseverance.

The reader may question whether Connor's journey arrives at some sort of redemption. Although the epilogue certainly hints at a happy ending, the answer remains unclear and perhaps beside the point. In the chapter entitled "Blue Blue Windows," a bus driver says to Connor, "Maybe your movie is about looking instead of finding" (137), a sentiment that applies equally to the novel itself. ■



COURTESY OF JOHN HOPENTHALER

ABOVE Luke Whisnant reading from *The Connor Project* at ECU's Joyner Library, Greenville, NC, Apr. 2022

\* See Annasue Wilson, "An Unseemly Emotion: PW Talks with Claire Messud," *Publishers Weekly* 29 Apr. 2013: [web](#).