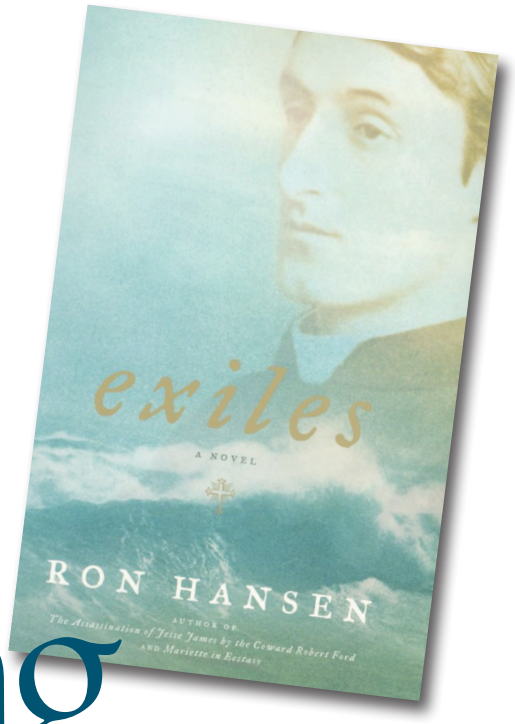
Daniel de Roulet considers the uncertainty of life's realities, and talks with novelist **Ron Hansen** about faith, literature, and his new book, *Exiles*.



Weathering the Storms

When Philip Yancey published *Disappointment with God* in 1988, he claimed to ask three questions that few Christians dare to ask aloud: Is God unfair? Is God silent? Is God hidden? The 1997 edition's back cover seemed to seek to reassure the reader even after Yancey's reputation as a reputable Christian writer was established: "Yancey answers these questions with clarity, richness, and biblical assurance. He takes us beyond the things that make for disillusionment to a deeper faith." Charles Swindoll was quoted as well, perhaps to give the reader an extra nod that Yancey's book indeed was safe reading.

I like Yancey, but more because of another phrase on that same back cover: the writing is described as "insightful and deeply personal… [pointing] to the odd disparity between our concept of God and the realities of life."

Big questions interest me, but the smaller, personal realities are where I live and breathe. One doesn't have to look far to see people asking such questions. Is my job secure? Will I keep my home? Perhaps the questions are more quiet and constant. What will the test results from the doctor be? Will my son or daughter get back on the right track? If life does not go as planned, will I or someone I love fall through the cracks? In those moments, will God answer my prayers?

Ron Hansen in many ways is Philip Yancey's counterpart in the world of fiction. He has been publishing short fiction and novels since the late 1970s, including an eclectic collection of stories, *Nebraska*; novels such as *Desperadoes*, *Atticus*, and *Mariette in Ecstasy*; and a group of essays on writing and the religious life called *A Stay against Confusion*. He wrote the foreword to the tenth anniversary edition of Henri Nouwen's *Can You Drink This Cup?* In that classic work, Nouwen writes, "For a long time we might not feel capable of accepting our own life; we might keep fighting for a better or at least a different life." This, I think, is the subject matter of Hansen's latest book, *Exiles*.

The novel is a curious juxtaposition of two histories, intertwined with a poem. Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was a bit of a prodigy, born into an Anglican family that produced poets and painters. By his eighteenth birthday he had been awarded both a poetry prize and a scholarship to Oxford, where he earned a rare "double-first" degree. At Oxford, he also met John Henry Newman, who provided him with the answers he needed to convert to Roman Catholicism.

As with everything he did, Hopkins put his all into his conversion. He entered the Society of Jesus and, believing that the production of poetry would bring him only into conflict with his sacrificial service to God, he burned his early poems. Later, as

Hansen tells the story, encouragement from a brother during Hopkins's studies in Wales, the influence of theologian John Duns Scotus, and the odd occurrence of a shipwreck in early December of 1875, prompted the Jesuit to write again, resulting in his long poem, "The Wreck of the Deutschland."

The history that so touched Hopkins in the account of the shipwreck was the fate of five German Franciscan nuns, who were sent from their order among increasing anti-Catholic sentiment and legislation in Germany to found a new faction of the order in, of all places, Missouri. The great ship, a veteran of many successful voyages and staffed by an experienced crew, was confounded by a furious winter storm near the mouth of the River Thames. The vessel, unable to navigate in the weather, was torn apart by a shoal and then finished by the unabated wind and wild seas of the storm. Although a portion of the crew and passengers survived, 157 people died less than four miles from shore.

Hopkins's poem is now considered a masterpiece, but in the 1870s and 1880s his verse seemed clearly experimental in its diction, meters, and rhythms, enough so as to keep his poems in obscurity until well after his death. We even wonder if through much of his life he felt this work to be of primary importance. Instead of seeing himself as a poet, he went as a priest where the Society of Jesus assigned him, away from the beauty of his beloved Wales to Sheffield, Oxford, London, the slums of Liverpool, Manchester, and finally Glasgow, where he found himself, like the nuns about whom he once wrote, an exile—from home and family, nature, any possibility of leisure, and even the sense of God's presence in his daily work. He died in Glasgow of typhoid fever, almost unrecognizable in premature old age. Hopkins's last confession, writes Hansen, asked forgiveness for wasting his poetic gift.

This theme of storms, literal and metaphorical, runs through Hansen's work: a sudden blizzard's havoc on the Great Plains in "Wickedness," the opening story to *Nebraska*; the unexpected news of a lost son in *Atticus*; the conflict of devotion and the realities of human frailty and community in *Mariette in Ecstasy*; the winter storm of *Exiles*. Even the primary essay in *A Stay against Confusion* is about the story and then film *Babette's Feast*, written by Danish author Isak Dinesen, whose protagonist is exiled to Jutland and a life she never imagines, first by the political storms of France and then to the shores of Denmark by a storm of the cold North Sea.

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Ron Hansen

Much as from Philip Yancey's work, one might hope for easy answers from Hansen, but finding such assurances would go against that fact that life does not go as planned—something about as central to Christian theology and the stories of the Bible as can be. The tragedies that strike people of faith may be remembered and realized as meaningful exemplars, but at the time they are often inglorious and humiliating. They hold both the divine and the very human. But we rarely can do more than speculate at God's purposes or we mistake them so that we are left simply to do God's work, as best we can, with the sufficient grace given to us.

Hansen's prose, often as poetic and life-breathing as Hopkins's own rhythms and meter, shows us both the shores of home and our mutual exile. Of Hopkins on his deathbed, Hansen writes, "But he is shipwrecked and foundered, the prey of the gales. A cold washrag paints his face, is folded onto his forehead, but he cannot look in time to see whose hand. The contrariness of the body: to be chilled with fever."

And later: "The faces of friends and relatives who had died visited him continually in his dreams, each smiling and welcoming. Well dressed, in a grand ballroom, with an orchestra playing Henry Purcell. And five nuns, off to the side so he could not see their faces. He felt a thumb form a cross on his forehead and smelled the olive oil of anointing."

For that honesty and the faith that both embraces and struggles against unexpected turns and storms—the life that Jesus holds out when he asks

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if we are able to drink his cup—Hansen's work should be read and appreciated.

I recently had an opportunity to ask Hanson about his latest work, *Exiles*; his interest in the poet Hopkins; and the intersection of faith and literature.

What draws you to Gerard Manley Hopkins as a poet? What drew you to him as the subject of a historical novel?

I first became aware of Hopkins through Dylan Thomas, whose poems I discovered in high school. A Thomas biography noted the profound influence of Hopkins on his work, so I sought it out and discovered the source for Dylan Thomas's vital imagery and passionate, incantatory style. I'm still amazed by how much Hopkins can squeeze into a sonnet. I go back to the poetry again and again and always find something new in it.

Looking at the Hopkins biographies available over the years, I saw that none of the authors really understood him. Many were frankly irreligious so they were hopelessly shackled when trying to get to the heart of his poetry. Even those who were more kindred spirits often faltered when faced with the mystery and enigma in Hopkins, and the rules of non-fiction hampered them. With a historical novel I felt I could attract readers who were reluctant to read a biography, construct a personality very close to the real thing, and at the same time speculate about him in ways that were at least plausible. It was a labor of love.

I'm fascinated by the counter stories of Hopkins and the Sisters of Saint Francis as both being stories of exiles. What are you hoping the reader gains from the stories and their juxtaposition? How difficult was it for you to match the realism of Hopkins's life with that of the sisters, for which there is considerably less historical information to draw from?

We hear of lives lost in a shipwreck and we think it's sad, a tragedy, but the feeling is frequently different when we encounter stories, like that of Hopkins, in which lives are lost because of misunderstanding, misplacement, mismanagement, and the like. Our pity is mixed with chiding, especially when the chaos seems due to some mental imbalance. Like Hopkins's friend Robert Bridges, we become skeptical and disapproving when internal forces, rather than external forces such as weather and accident, are involved. The five sisters' lives were cut short in a tangential kind of martyrdom, but I wanted to illustrate how Hopkins's own longer life was a kind of martyrdom in which he foundered in jobs for which he was ill-suited and was tormented by storms of depression.

The five sisters were not wholly invented. I had some rudimentary information, such as birthdates, birth place, schooling, date of entrance into the convent, and so on. And I supplemented that by reading biographies of the nineteenth-century foundresses of religious orders in Europe, borrowing from them whatever seemed likely. I would have loved to have photos of each sister, but there was only one and from far off: of them laid out in the basement of a church, awaiting the funeral rites. I did know one of them, the youngest, was little, and the oldest, still in her late twenties, was six feet tall and possessed a deep voice. Even at a distance, I could see from the photograph that one was heavy, and one very fair. I let my imagination take over from those hints.

Your description of the storm that shipwrecked the *Deutschland* reminds me in some ways of your account of another storm in "Wickedness" from your collection of stories, *Nebraska*. Is there an interest in that particular kind of situation, or is that a valid connection?

I'm glad you saw the connection. A blizzard or the foul weather of the sea conjures fears of malevolent forces. But it's called *wild*erness for a reason. The untamed, obeying only the laws of physics and meteorology, can seem evil and out to get us. It's easy to see why primitive peoples considered the earth and its atmosphere governed by vengeful gods, for it doesn't take much for us frail human beings to be helpless: a few weeks without food, a few days without water, a few minutes in freezing cold, and the consequences are fatal. You put a fictional character in extremis and you have a perfect basis for philosophical, theological, or psychological interrogations.

I was struck by your description of Hopkins as a prematurely old man in Dublin and his final confession to the Rev. Tom Finley "of shutting off the grace of inspiration by not paying enough attention to his poetic gift." How much did Hopkins struggle in reconciling his talent as a spiritual gift? From your experience, is this struggle common for people of faith who write literature?

People did age more quickly back then. Medical and dental care was appalling, for one, and the air and nutrition not good. Even a hundred years ago, the life expectancy was forty-seven years. I was stunned when I discovered that Franklin D. Roosevelt, that weak, elderly, infirm, not-with-it president at Yalta, was just sixty-three years old when he died. I would have guessed at least eighty.

About realizing his talent: each writer or artist or performer has to contend with that, for it's an

essentially selfish and seemingly unnecessary act. You hole up in your room and practice your art to the exclusion of other things. Whatever hour that Hopkins gave to his poetry was an hour he was not giving to ministry or prayer or just social interaction. My brother is fond of noting that many people have talent but they lack that inbuilt need, that "you gotta wantta," that ends up in productivity. And it takes a particularly strong connection with God for one to be certain that he is not just fooling himself in responding to his deepest desires, especially when others may be censorious. Had I been Hopkins's spiritual director—a laughable thought, I'll admit—I would have pointed out that Jesus would heal dozens of people and then go away by himself to pray, leaving hundreds more unhealed. My sense is that Hopkins and lots of other priests in his time would have felt guilty imitating that. Even having said that, I notice in myself that other obligations often have priority over my own fiction writing. The struggle to get work done is ongoing.

You have commented at some length in *A Stay against Confusion* about writing as sacrament, pointing to writers such as John Gardner and Hopkins, and to works such as *Babette's Feast*. How does this idea continue to play out in your own writing, particularly *Exiles*?

In my childhood catechism classes we were taught that a sacrament is "a visible sign of an invisible grace." And there is a hymn with the lyrics, "What you hear in the dark you must speak in the light." Our inward experiences, our graced moments, need to be communicated to others to help them see how they have been similarly graced. With *Exiles* I was able to be more overt in that construction because the characters themselves were more

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attuned to the sacramental nature of the world—of God holding it together, animating it, and yet still giving it freedom, including the freedom to fail.

It seems to me that "Christian fiction" has been divided into two halves—those books one sees quarantined in their own section between "New Age" and "Religion" at the local bookstore, and those others that have escaped the quarantine and have successfully mingled with the section simply called "Fiction." Your books are among the latter. Any thoughts on this, or on the risks and expectations about being a person of faith who writes?

Quite often I hear from first novelists who suspect their manuscripts have been rejected by agents or publishers because they entertain religious themes. It can be a hard sell, especially if an author's goal is to evangelize. I have never read the books in those quarantined areas and only saw one of the Left Behind movies, so I don't know much about the field or its audience. In my own fiction writing, I just try to get as close as I can to the books of my heroes, imitating their style and thrust and narratives, but with a slightly franker exposition of the spiritual aspects of our lives. But the worry about being pigeonholed or, even worse, ignored, is very real.

Who is on your reading list these days?

I'm reading the fiction of friends: *The Decoding of Lana Morris* by Laura and Tom McNeal, *Breath* by Tim Winton, and *Only the Lonely* by Gary Zebrun.

You're currently a member of an English department faculty, and I assume that means teaching a certain number of creative writing classes. I have heard a number of writers express a wide range of reactions to teaching writing. Are there advantages for you in teaching? Does it affect your own writing schedule?

About the last question, yes, it does affect my writing schedule. I just looked at the clock and saw I needed to head to school. Were I a full-time writer I'd head into the scene I'm hankering to write. But the advantages of teaching, beyond the paycheck, are the zest and vitality you gain from interested students, the opportunities you have to investigate and try out new ideas, the avoidance of isolation and narcissism, and the colleague-imposed obligation you feel to keep the quality of your own work high.

Anything in the works?

I'm collecting my stories into a book-length manuscript and currently writing what may be the last insertion. My collection *Nebraska* was published twenty years ago, so I have been negligent with the form. I have a novella in mind, too, but don't know if that will join the stories or stand on its own. You open the kitchen cupboard and find cans of soup and for some reason your hand selects one to pull down. My fiction projects are always instinctive like that—for reasons I try not to interrogate, at least initially, one topic looms larger than others and I find myself sneaking up on a work-in-progress. ■