

Jon Hassler's Agatha McGee: A case study

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Abstract:

This project examines the way in which Agatha McGee, a character common to several of American novelist Jon Hassler's (1933-2008) novels, grows as a person and as a Catholic throughout her life. I attempt to define what a Catholic is and then argue how Agatha is a modern-day Catholic through the analysis of her interactions and choices with the characters she meets.

Introduction:

The first novel I ever read by Hassler was *Staggerford*. It was for the Catholic Novel class my spring-semester of sophomore year. I was intrigued by the novel's premise surrounding English teacher Miles Pruitt and his experiences in small, rural Staggerford, Minnesota. Agatha was a part of Pruitt's life and her strong, devout faith made me ponder a question: how can a person put so much blind faith in Christ, and in a system (the Church) that has a history of massacring hundreds in the name of God? Thus, I used this question as a steppingstone for project ideas. After much thinking, I finally came to a topic I was interested in, Agatha McGee's undying flame that kindles for God's compassion. How can Agatha remain so deeply rooted in her Christian values while living amongst a large community of non-believers? How does her way of life affect the townspeople of Staggerford? These questions helped me to navigate my way through this project.

To me, back in 2018, it seemed that it was almost taboo to say that I either was, or was not, religiously affiliated. Why? Because I am majoring in English with Maryland certification in secondary education, I am, and have been, well-versed in public school policies, one of which is the representation of religion in schools. A teacher could not/cannot show bias toward a religion

whatsoever because of separation of church-and-state. Add in the fact that America as a whole was already on edge over President Donald Trump's 2016 election, and one can see why I avoided talking about anything personal in public, or possibly face the wrath of an angry and vocal dissenter. I believe that Pruitt also avoided the topic of religion but for different reasons. One being that religion had become repetitious and unchanging for him as he had gone to a Catholic elementary and middle school as a child. In the novel, the reader finds out from Agatha that Pruitt is indeed Catholic despite Pruitt not being seen attending any sort of religious mass. Yet, Pruitt demonstrated some of the tenets of Thomas H. Groome's good Catholic values: Commitment to Community, Commitment to Justice, and Universal Spirituality- I point to Groome's characteristics of a Catholic because Dr. Hind's referred to his explanations on the topic in her Catholic Novel class to help supplement a different novel we were reading at the time- and I believe that this is due to Agatha living and forming a close relationship with Pruitt.

Agatha McGee, a former, private-middle school teacher and Catholic school principal, has lived in Staggerford for many, many years. She has taught or encountered many of the characters living in the town and is a devout Catholic. Though set in her ways, she is not unchangeable, and is certainly not immune to committing unethical acts.

By the end of the paper, the reader will have both a better understanding of Agatha's growth as a Catholic, and just exactly what makes her "Catholic".

Jon Hassler's life

Hassler was born in Minnesota in 1933 and grew up in two small, rural towns in the state. He earned his B.A in English from St. John's College (Mn.) in 1955 and his M.A in English from the University of North Dakota in 1960. While studying for his M.A, Hassler worked as a

high school English teacher until 1965. He later taught at the post-secondary level until 1980. As previously mentioned, he began his writing career in 1970 and released his first novel in 1977 entitled *Staggerford*. In 1978, the novel was awarded the novel of the year award from the Friends of American Writers. Hassler was later named Regents Professor Emeritus and Writer-in-Residence at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota in 1980. Another one of his novels to receive an award is *Grand Opening*, which was chosen as best fiction of the year by the Society of Midland Authors in 1987. Hassler earned the Colman Barry Award for Distinguished Contributions to Religion and Society from St. John's University in 2003, the Flanagan Prize in 2000 from the Minnesota Humanities Commission, and the 2000 Distinguished Minnesotan Award from Bemidji State University.

Hassler married three times, once while a teacher in high school which resulted in three children, and twice post 1990. In 1994, Hassler was diagnosed with progressive supranuclear palsy- a degenerative brain disease that affected his motor skills and vision- but he continued to write until his death on March 20, 2008. A complete list of his works is listed in *Appendix A*.

Many of the places featured in his novels are places that Hassler has visited and some of the events written about such as the terrorist arc in *Dear James* are actual events that occurred. In Plut's interview with Hassler, Hassler admitted that, "I write more about the people I'm with than what I see. I look at the people around me instead of what I should be seeing" (Plut, 175).

Literature Review

Hassler began writing in 1970 while he was a teacher at Brainerd Community College and continued until his death in 2008. His writing ranged from children's literature to non-fiction, but he was most known for his novels depicting characters living in a rural town in

Minnesota. Many of his novels carry the theme of Catholicity. David Hawley writes, “Hassler was born in Minneapolis, but grew up in Staples and Plainview, where he graduated from high school. The latter town in Wabasha County is thought to be the model for the small towns in his novels that are so important in the lives of his central characters. Many are Catholic — or lapsed Catholics — and most are involved in a gentle struggle to discover purpose in their lives” (Hawley, 2012). This characterization of Hassler’s subjects can be seen in *Staggerford* with Miles Pruitt and in *A Green Journey* with Randy Meers, a minor character who provides comic relief from the main plot. Both characters appear bored with their own respective daily routines and attempt to find something around them or in their lives to be at peace with. Likewise, James Rogers agrees with Hawley saying, “Most of [Hassler’s] protagonists are unheroic Catholics trying to do their best” (317). Miles Pruitt exemplifies Rogers’ statement. Pruitt’s untimely death at the hands of a deranged mother with a shotgun was tragically sudden. With the purpose of trying to check up on the safety of one of his students, as any competent and caring teacher should do, he is met with a bullet. Hassler’s death in *Staggerford* is not drawn out nor is it glorified; the description of the incident lasts a mere paragraph. Hassler writes about that accident as just that, an accident. Anthony Low notes that, “Indeed, I say ‘writers like Hassler,’ but he is one of the few of his kind extant: a Christian realist, in both the literary and the older philosophical meanings of the term” (61). Pruitt’s actions appear to suggest that he no longer believes in the Catholic church since he stopped attending Sunday mass and stopped going to confession when he was a teenager, but Agatha’s demand that Father Finn give Pruitt his final rites, upon hearing Pruitt was shot, suggests that either: a) Pruitt secretly held out some strand of hope towards the belief that there was some higher deity, or b) Agatha, being the devout Catholic she is, held out some strand of hope that Miles would once again find his faith in God. I wish to

think that the former is true in this case. Jesuit Christian magazine, “America” noted that Hassler’s books “examined with infinite compassion the lives of the residents of small-town Minnesota, and typically touched on overtly Catholic themes: Clergy and religion made frequent appearances in his stories, and parish life was quite often at the center of his characters’ lives,” as in the case of Agatha (*Catholic Review*, 2012).

Hassler wrote Pruitt as a reflection of a late 20th century Catholic realist, but more interestingly, wrote Bishop Dick Baker in *A Green Journey* as a Catholic realist, too, despite his title of Bishop. This Catholic realist take in society can be better visualized when Agatha (a Catholic traditionalist) and Bishop Baker are compared. Agatha is highly pious and strongly believes in sticking to the traditional ways of the Catholic faith as she even calls Father Healy over for house visits to confess her sins in *the Staggerford Flood*. Agatha is the traditional Catholic in Hassler’s novels, and as Low writes:

Hassler keeps a certain ironic distance from Agatha on [matters of liturgical importance], which are often comic, through the use of other characters who represent important aspects of the faith such as “Bishop Dick Baker, who is responsible for closing down parochial school around his diocese and committing liturgical atrocities in the Spirit of Vatican II” but “proves to be not so wicked, nor foolish, as he seems at first through Agatha’s suspicious eyes” (Low, 67).

Both Bishop Baker and Agatha argue in *A Green Journey* over the demise of Catholicism in America’s youth. Irony does present itself in these instances as Agatha, the strong-willed Catholic, at times appears to replace Bishop Baker as a symbol for the Catholic church in Hassler’s novels. Agatha sincerely believes in sticking to tradition, as such she fights the change that Bishop Baker enacts concerning confirmation with the school kids. From Bishop Baker’s

perspective, not requiring every newly confirmed to attend a confirmation ceremony saves both the Bishop time and the confirmed time, but to Agatha, the centuries old tradition must be followed. Yet, Agatha does however show some adaptation to change in society as Low writes, “It will not do to underestimate Miss McGee. She constantly reveals new reserves of moral strength and surprising depths of sympathetic love” (Low 64). This example of subtle change can be seen in *Dear James*, when Agatha forgives Imogene Kite for rifling through Agatha’s personal letters and then sharing them to the public.

Interestingly, C.J Truesdale believes that Hassler has never truly related strongly to one of his characters in the Staggerford universe:

He is always present in his novels... he never identifies wholly with any of his major characters like Agatha McGee in *Staggerford* (his first novel) or Peggy Benoit in *Rookery Blues* (his most recent one). In fact, I would go so far as to say that although he is strongly attracted to characters like Agatha, Peggy, and Simon Shea, they don't much resemble him and often do things or take positions that he would probably not take himself (Truesdale).

Truesdale adds that Hassler is “intrigued by the fact that laypeople like Agatha McGee and Simon Shea, both highly traditional Catholics, take vows and commitments more seriously than many of the clergy and are, in fact, “better Catholics”” (Truesdale). Agatha does in fact take the Catholic faith much more seriously than most other people in the fictional universe such as Bishop Dick Baker in *A Green Journey*, who put out an ultimatum saying that young, budding future Catholics would no longer be automatically required to attend a confirmation ceremony. Agatha, wholeheartedly disagreeing with this stance, made Bishop Baker administer the ceremony anyways.

Ed Block comments that Hassler typically writes about themes of loneliness and depression, love and friendship, and rivalry and betrayal which can be seen in *A Green Journey* and *Dear James*. In *A Green Journey*, Hassler mentions that Agatha has been thinking of retiring from teaching at St. Isidore's Elementary, putting her in a moody state. James, Agatha's love interest, acts as a double-edged sword to Agatha, drawing in her attention and motivating her to try to experience new things while also forcing her to strongly re-examine her beliefs and getting her to ask herself what she truly values in life. This push-toward-and-pull-away effect that James has on Agatha allows Hassler to squeak in commentary on how the Catholic church should present itself to the public moving forward. Block believes that *Dear James*, a novel that could be considered the direct sequel to *A Green Journey*, "manifests a clear and coherent direction and purpose: a sustained re-consideration of Agatha McGee at age seventy. From out of depression and lost direction, Agatha embarks on a pilgrimage that, surprisingly, re-unites her with her friend and 'soul mate,' James O'Hannon" (Block, 183). He adds that, "Though Catholic in many external details, the fundamentally Christian dimension of the novel is most present in its themes of peace, forgiveness, and community... [an] incarnational vision that is the hallmark of Hassler's whole career" (Block, 184). Joseph Plut also notes this theming pattern as he comments that the characters in *Dear James*, "meet up with distress, violence, and evil and they come to terms with these things in one way or another, making subtle decisions that touch the reader more subtly than I can adequately suggest here" (Plut, 170).

I contend that Hassler's novels that feature Agatha in them have a deeper purpose than just to entertain. In many of his novels, he brings up several controversies surrounding the Church and its way of functioning in both small, rural areas like Staggerford, and in larger cities like Venice, Italy. I believe that Hassler is critiquing the church by having his characters, who

are symbols of the church, act in a way that Hassler finds problematic. Afterwards, Hassler will use Agatha as the symbol for what the Church should really do and how the church should really think. For example, Bishop Baker's deeper purpose is to represent the Church's waning touch with its Catholic roots and traditions, as in the instance when Bishop Baker proposes a centuries old rule change about confirmation. Father James O'Hannon represents the members of the Church and how the Church is slowly losing interest for the younger generation. James' love for Agatha and the actions James takes to achieve a romantic relationship with Agatha, such as lying about his profession to meet with her, is a symbol for that dying interest. Agatha fights for the opposite side of both the Bishop and James. Agatha refuses James' initial advances because she knows that as a Priest, James has taken an oath of celibacy and she fights the Bishop and his rule change attempts, eventually winning both her movement to keep the rules as they were and a new friend.

Works Analyzed

In *Staggerford* (1970), Agatha is a minor character, but her influence over others is clearly visible. The novel follows the daily events of Miles Pruitt. Pruitt is a mid-30-year old high school English teacher in rural Staggerford, Minnesota. Pruitt struggles with finding a purpose to his life and the novel takes the reader through roughly one-and-a-half weeks of his life in October, detailing his experiences with his students, the local native American tribe in Minnesota, his Christian faith, and his love-life. Agatha acts as Pruitt's therapist, listening to his struggles and taking care of him physically as she is his landlord. Agatha comes into the spotlight for the first time in *A Green Journey* (1985)- a story that takes place following the events in *Staggerford*. Agatha has been writing letters for some time to a priest in Ireland named James O'Hannon, When she gets the chance to visit Ireland, she meets up with James and

initially enjoys her time, however, upon discovering that he is actually a priest rather than the teacher he said he was, she ignores James' future letters and attempts to ignore him for the rest of the trip. James' deceitfulness, though not born out of malice, but out of his desire for a friend to talk to, hurts Agatha. In the end, she forgives James and even continues to write letters to James, but never send the letters in the mail. This novel detail Agatha's experience throughout this ordeal and the reader is allowed to view a different part of Agatha's life: her love life. Similarly, *Dear James* (1993) is a continuation of the events from *A Green Journey* and has Agatha once again traveling abroad, this time to Italy, and reconnecting with Father James O'Hannon. While abroad, Agatha's personal letters to James are read by some citizens of Staggerford and Agatha's reputation takes a hit because in her letters she criticizes some of the towns' people. The reader sees Agatha's ability to endure in the face of adversity and her ability to forgive others. Her caring side is also revealed as she befriends a young boy and brings him over to America in order to rehabilitate him from the nasty effects of his troubled family background. *My Staggerford Journal* (1999) is not a fiction novel, but a short memoir detailing the daily thoughts of Jon Hassler as he attempts to write *Staggerford*. In the book, the reader sees the moments in Hassler's life that motivates him to write in the first place and the different life experiences that he draws from to create the different characters featured in *Staggerford*. In *the Staggerford Flood*, Agatha takes in several people from the town to live with her temporarily after they become displaced. Surrounded by people who live and think differently from her, Agatha attempts to accommodate everyone to the best of her ability. The reader sees how Agatha is more spirited with her guests around than without, thus suggesting that she has begun to get lonesome. In *the New Woman* (2005) Agatha attempts to familiarize herself in her new living space, Sunset Senior Living. The readers see how much influence and weight her words carry when she

persuades the Mayor of Staggerford to allow a grave to be dug up in hopes of finding a lottery ticket. The reader is also able to see how age has affected her memory as in the case when she attempts to locate her diamond brooch that suddenly went missing.

Nine Things That Makes Us Catholic

Dr. Thomas H. Groome is a theology professor at Boston College and has written several books and articles centered around the topic of Catholicity. He served as a Catholic Priest for 17 years in Ireland before leaving for one year. After asking for dispensation from the Church, he got married and took on a role as an educator in America's higher education system. Groome has been critical of the Catholic church's non-progressive practices such as not allowing married men into the priesthood and not allowing women into the clergy. According to Groome's *Nine Things That Make Us Catholic*, there are nine specific traits or behaviors that Catholics everywhere have in common: A positive understanding of the person, commitment to community, sacramental outlook, scripture and tradition, holistic faith, commitment to justice, universal spirituality, Catholics are catholic, and devotion to Mary. (See *Appendix B* for detailed information about each trait.)

Agatha McGee

Throughout the fictional universe created by Hassler, Agatha is many things: a teacher, a sister (sibling-type), principal, a caretaker, a lover, a Catholic, a mentor, and a mother-like figure. Agatha is very much embedded into Staggerford's community. She has reach and influence over many people and in many places from Mayor Mullholland to the local library. Agatha's commitment to community is best seen in *the Staggerford Flood*, when she takes in multiple people displaced by the flooding happening during the period. Agatha offers food,

entertainment, and most importantly, love during the flood. In *the New Woman*, Agatha tries to befriend senior citizen John Beezer and attempts to help him get along better with the rest of Sunset Senior Living's community by directing him to correct his table manners and his informal speech. In *Dear James*, Agatha hosts a Thanksgiving dinner with members of the community, and in *Staggerford*, Agatha's brief appearances make her out to be a caretaker over several characters. For example, she owns the house where Pruitt lives and makes him dinner every night, and she is the first to contact Father Finn when Pruitt's death reaches her via phone call. Her motherly-like appeal can be seen towards the end of the novel when she offers to take in teenager Beverley Bingham after Beverley's mother is incarcerated. Even before she takes Beverley in temporarily, Agatha acted as a mentor to Beverley by allowing Beverley to come over after school for tea. While drinking tea together, Agatha listens to Beverley's woes and gives her advice. Afterwards, Agatha acts as a mother, scrutinizing over Beverley's appearance and mannerisms, yet Agatha recognizes that Beverley has much to live for. She recognizes that Beverley is a product of her deranged mother and unstable family and thus tries to help her get to a better place in her life. In this way, Agatha demonstrates sacramental outlook. In *A Green Journey*, Agatha is again seen as caretaker when she takes in one of her former students, Janet Raft, who is expecting a baby. Her sense of ownership over her students is shown by her advice to Janet about her posture (Hassler, 3). However, the one adjective that can best describe Agatha is Christian. She shows holistic faith towards God, never missing Sunday mass and always confessing her sins either at Church or as seen in *The Staggerford Flood*, in her own house when the local priest makes a house-call. Most of her actions stem from the catechisms she was taught as a child, and most, if not all of her actions are driven with the purpose of living within the values of a good Christian which has helped to instill a commitment to justice. If Agatha senses

moral wrongdoing or error within her, she will immediately attempt to figure out where it stems from and attempt to cleanse her sin through a confession. If she sees other people doing actions that seem morally wrong to her, she will call those actions out. Agatha has what some may call a strong moral compass, and she is someone who will fight for what she believes in. In *A Green Journey*, two examples of Agatha either objecting to immoral deeds by others or fighting for her beliefs can be seen just six pages from each other. On page 18, Agatha is seen fighting for Janet's right to compensation for having the first baby of the new calendar year. In Staggerford, the person who bears the first newborn receives the title of First New Year Baby and a gift basket full of baby supplies. However, even though Janet bore the first baby, the title and gifts were given to someone else on the grounds that Janet is unwed. Agatha, however, steps in and fights for Janet, saying, "Now please get on the phone and tell your colleagues they're guilty of the worst kind of discrimination, namely, prejudice against the poor and helpless" (Hassler, 18). The second example of Agatha's strong moral compass showing is when she resigned/retired from St. Isidore Elementary school as a sign of protest to sweeping rule changes at the school which include students no longer being required to attend daily mass and the Catholic Catechisms no longer being taught. Though the retirement only lasted two weeks, Agatha made what most might call a drastic move to bring attention to what she believes is important to the Catholic faith. Yet, in both *A Green Journey* and *Dear James*, Agatha's commitment to the faith and her moral compass is tested by James. She is of course shocked upon learning that he lied about his profession and is not a teacher, but a Priest, but more importantly, in *A Green Journey*, Agatha does not allow herself to experience love. She knows that what James is doing is wrong because he is, again, a Priest, and her first thought was "offer to help him through his crisis" (Hassler, 159). However, in *Dear James*, Agatha allows herself to fall in love with James, once

again joining him for walks along the ocean. She allows herself to trust other people and to show vulnerability to James. This can be seen when she tells James all her thoughts about the townspeople of Staggerford. Agatha eventually forgives James because she understands that everyone is innately good inside. After going through a period of emotional suffering, Agatha realizes that James is a person who makes mistakes, just like every other person. His title of Priest put an unfair burden on himself that required him to constantly follow the Catholic tenets and be a good role model. As he was not allowed to be himself, James told Agatha that he was a teacher so that Agatha would not have the common perception that most people would have when talking to a Priest. As a result, Agatha was able to eventually judge James' character not from the perspective of a Catholic, but the basis of a normal person, and her judgement decided to choose to forgive James. Another example of Agatha lies in *Dear James*. Agatha offers to take in Frederick because she sees worth in him despite his mannerisms and preference for being alone. After Frederick admits to letting Imogene into her house, in which Imogene rifles through Agatha's personal affects, Agatha still treats Frederick with respect and dignity, showing a positive understanding of Frederick. She offers him a chance to live with her and she is willing to hire his help for housework from time to time. When it comes time to vote on the next local librarian, Agatha could vote "no" on Imogene as a candidate and Imogene would not be selected, but instead, Agatha votes "yes" because she realizes that Imogene is indeed a person who is fallible to mistakes and that she has value to the community despite being fallible.

Even though Agatha appears to be a devout Catholic, which can be seen through her multitudinous outer and inner dialogues through Hassler's novels about the morality or ethicality of a decision or situation, she is not perfect. As Truesdale notes, several situations in Hassler's novels, "test Agatha's rigidly held Catholic principles; she, like Simon Shea, is forced by the

external circumstances of her life and her age to compromise that rigidity” (Truesdale). For instance, in *A Green Journey*, Agatha lies to most of her friends about the true nature of her trip to Ireland, which is to meet a man she has taken a romantic interest in. Though she later finds out that this man is a Priest, she lets herself have romantic feelings for another person despite frequently saying in *Dear James* that, “men were to blame for her tears, and a great deal more” (Hassler, 78). In *the Staggerford Flood*, Agatha is seen committing a sin: fraud and lying about death. When Agatha’s friend’s identical sister suddenly passes away in her house, Agatha brings up the idea that the living sister assume the name and identity of the deceased sister in order to save the local post-office from shutting down. Agatha commits the sin of fraud in this instance for what she deems is a worthy cause and is guilty of not telling the truth. Lastly, in *The New Woman*, Agatha chooses not to have a positive understanding of the person by assuming someone’s guilt. She accuses John Beezer, secretly in her mind, of stealing her missing brooch because she does not like his table manners or the way he presents himself to others. After confronting him, without directly accusing him, she finds out that the brooch was mixed up in her folded, clean laundry. It should be noted that Agatha does eventually apologize to John Beezer for secretly accusing him and then comes to the realization that he is a good person by helping him become more likeable in the Sunset Senior Living community.

Agatha’s lifestyle can be described as simple, cautious, and purposeful. *The New Woman*, shows the reader what her lifestyle is like the most as the novel details Agatha’s attempt at adjusting to a different living space. Agatha frequently locks her apartment door both when she goes out of the building and when she is in the apartment. Her cautious nature can be seen when she says to John Beezer, a farmer who has lived in Sunset Senior Living far longer than Agatha, “I’ve lost a valuable piece of jewelry, and I’ve decided it was stolen” (Hassler, 14).

After hearing Beezer say he has never heard of something being stolen despite living there for two years, Agatha responds with, “Well, that surprises me, the way everybody leaves their doors unlocked” (Hassler, 14). In *Dear James*, Agatha’s house is described as having no dishwasher, no microwave, and only a single-slice toaster by Imogene Kite, the daughter of Lillian Kite. Agatha’s house, described as “prehistoric” by Imogene, tells the reader that Agatha lives a very routine and simple life. She is satisfied with what she knows and does not tend to venture out and try new things unless it has a distinct purpose to it brought on by a compelling reason. For instance, in *A Green Journey*, Agatha’s main motivator for going on the group trip to Ireland is to meet James and nothing else. This urge to meet James was driven by the letters both sent to each other over the years. In *the New Woman*, Agatha’s main reason for agreeing to test out living in Sunset Senior Living was to have human company around to help her in case of an accident, which said thought was coincidentally triggered by the fall she took in chapter 2. In *Dear James*, Agatha’s only reason for going on the group trip to Italy is to meet James once again because a letter he sent to Bishop Baker indicated that something was amiss in James’ life. This decision to address the letter’s request was motivated by Agatha’s desire to find closure with James after their first meeting ended sourly. In *the Staggerford Flood*, Agatha’s decision to have the seven neighbors and friends take refuge in her house from the flood was driven by the fact that she felt lonely, and that she knew it was the right thing to do as a Catholic. This shows the trait of Catholics are catholic because Agatha is being compassionate and showing support and care for her neighbors. Agatha also likes order in her life. In *The New Woman*, she describes her former classroom as having “neat rows of desks bolted to the floor and each child in his or her place throughout the year,” and her observations about Thaddeus’s apartment being clean and neat and orderly show that she admires those who are also organized; however, she also

seems to desire purpose in others as she comments that, “Thaddeus’s room was not decorated much and thus showed little passion” (Hassler, 44). Yet, Agatha emulates Mother Mary. She shows compassion towards others less fortunate as in the case of the beggar in Italy in *Dear James*. She cares for her students and her neighbors as well, as previously noted, in *Staggerford Flood*.

Agatha’s personality is one I describe as witty and her words, sharp-tongued. She will frequently correct another person’s grammar and if she deems it necessary, be passive aggressive, but not to the point where her comments become rude. For example, in *The New Woman*, Agatha frequently corrects Beezer’s grammar and mannerisms whether it be the way he eats or chews, the slang he uses, or his appearance. In *A Green Journey*, Agatha outwits Bishop Baker. Bishop Baker did not deem it necessary any longer to hold an official ceremony for the confirmation of young Catholics. Agatha, disagreeing with this, finds out where Bishop Baker lives, visits him with one of the 17 young Catholics whom she prepped for the confirmation ceremony and brings them into his home one at a time into his presence for him to personally confirm into the Church, until he relents and holds a proper confirmation ceremony for everyone. Agatha took advantage of the fact that the Bishop said he would confirm anyone who sought him out, which would deem her to be a clever woman. However, Agatha still treats those different from her with respect. In *Dear James*, Agatha invites Sylvester Juba over for Thanksgiving dinner because it has been a tradition in her family to invite the Juba family over despite the fact that Sylvester keeps requesting Agatha’s hand in marriage (which is considered harassment!). Agatha is courteous and respectful to everyone in Staggerford, even though many of them do not appear to identify as Catholic. Most importantly though, during her time as an educator, she treated every one of her students with respect, even though they did not always follow the rules

at times. She cared for each one of her students no matter how much they irritated her. These actions prove that she shows universal spirituality and Catholics are catholic.

As a Catholic, Agatha believes in the very tenets she grew up with and will protest anything she deems as unnecessary change. As such, she is of strong opinion when it comes to certain aspects about the Church. In *A Green Journey*, Agatha and Bishop Baker argue over the future direction that the Church is heading. The Bishop wants to close St. Isidores Elementary since it is not profitable because people are choosing other places to attend. Agatha argues that it is because the Church keeps consolidating the places available to learn the Catholic faith, that there is a shortage of Priests in the world. She says that the reason America has to constantly go to other countries to look for Priests is because, “we never had to be spiritually tough in America. That’s why the Church in America is declining so horribly” (Hassler, 241). She points to the low attendance in the local church for daily mass and then ultimately sums up her argument with the idea that it all stems from the, “Decline of the school system, not the church as a whole” (Hassler, 242). In addition, Agatha cunningly outwits the Bishop and forces him to perform the confirmation ceremony on a group of students Agatha has been mentoring because she believes that everyone should undergo the ceremony. In *Staggerford*, Agatha calls the Father Finn over to the Bingham’s house, after Pruitt gets shot, for the Priest to perform Pruitt’s last confessional rites. Father Finn was the very first-person Agatha called after hearing that Pruitt was shot and the call was the first action Agatha performed after the news. In *Dear James*, Agatha stopped talking to James for quite a while because he was a Priest who was looking for love, and he deceived Agatha about being a teacher. She resumed talking to him after he stopped being a Priest, but she showed that she cares about the rules of the Church. Though it was already mentioned in this paper, in *A Green Journey*, Agatha was adamantly opposed to St.

Isidores' ruling that students were no longer required to attend daily mass and took a two-week 'retirement' as a result. Groome would say that Agatha demonstrates his fourth trait of a good Catholic: scripture and tradition. Agatha also believes in absolving her sins through confessions. In *the Staggerford Flood*, Agatha frequently calls in Father Healy for a home-confession to talk about her woes and to clear her conscience about many things such as differentiating between whether a lie or a fib was told, or whether a decision she made was ethical (that of lying about the identity of a dead body). Agatha even tells Father Healy, "I need forgiveness before I can take communion" (Hassler, 71). Again, as previously mentioned, in *Staggerford*, Agatha is the first to call Father Finn to have him administer Pruitt's last rites. Her religion is a huge part of her life and many of her decisions are based around the Catholic values. Agatha consistently thinks about God, and how her actions might anger God. In all the novels Agatha is written in, she consistently attends mass at least once a week (even in a different country!), says a prayer before her meals, treats others in her life with respect, and dutifully attempts to try to correct the wrongs of another person's actions. This last example can be seen most clearly via Agatha's role as a teacher and principal. Agatha mentored and taught her students the correct form and usages of the English language, and on how to be a good Catholic.

However, Agatha's most notable character trait is her ability to make a lasting impression on people she has interacted with. Her students, though initially displeased by her style of teaching, admit that she has changed them for the better. Agatha inspires others to think about his or her actions through her own words. In *Staggerford*, Hassler writes that, "In the minds of her former students, many of whom were now grandparents, she occupied a place somewhere between Moses and Emily Post," which shows how highly her former students praised her and on what level they respected her (Hassler, 275 [e-book ver.]). For example, in *the New Woman*,

Agatha is appalled by Beezer's lack of table manners and his incorrect grammar usage. Agatha then "risked his displeasure by correcting his grammar, and yet, far from being offended, he was asking for more of the same" (Hassler, 146). Agatha has a positive understanding of Beezer here. Though not instantaneously, she recognizes that Beezer needs guidance. In *the Staggerford Flood*, Beverly called Father Healy hoping to talk to Agatha to find closure after Agatha took her in 25 years earlier after Beverly's mother shot Pruitt. Despite losing someone she considered a friend, Agatha acted as a motherly figure to Beverly and let Beverly stay at her place. Beverly, 25 years later, now wished to see Agatha saying, "she hopes [Agatha] doesn't hard any hard feelings against her" (Hassler 15). In *Dear James*, Frederick regards Agatha highly because of the kind way she has treated him in the past and the respectful way she continues to treat him in the present. Agatha praised Frederick for telling the truth about an incorrect grade when he was younger, and as a result, Frederick has respected Agatha since. Her words still influence his actions in the present which is visible to the reader when Frederick tells the truth to the local unemployment office that he had not been looking for a job. He told the truth after many months of lying because Agatha had told Frederick, "A statement is either true or false, Frederick... You know what you must do, don't you, Frederick?" (Hassler, 89). I believe that Agatha instilled a sense of guilt in Frederick because Frederick truly cares about Agatha's different opinions. Agatha's demonstration of sacramental outlook can be seen when she mentors the confirmers in *Dear James*.

In *The New Woman*, Agatha shows her adherence to universal spirituality when she takes in Jennie Beezer, a Kindergartener who is suddenly dropped off at her apartment because her parents are in a divorce-battle: "Agatha stayed up until nearly midnight, watching Jennie sleep and trying to figure out why she had not called the police. It had something to do with the girl

herself. Jennie called up in Agatha an emotion like the one she used to feel in her teaching days, an attachment she felt for all her students, particularly the down-and-outers, those who came from deprived circumstances” (Hassler, 123). Agatha prioritized the young girl’s well-being and decided not to get law enforcement involved which would only further divide her parents’ feud. Devotion to Mary is seen throughout all of the works analyzed. Agatha is constantly seeking to remain in the green when it comes to balancing out her life. She symbolically asked for forgiveness from John Beezer in *the New Woman* by offering him advice on how to repair his reputation, and in *the Staggerford Flood*, Agatha was wracked by guilt over lying about Dort Callister’s identity.

Hassler and Agatha Comparisons

Jon Hassler and Agatha McGee are more alike than first meets the eye. Both were teachers specializing in English, but while Hassler taught at a public high school and a community college, Agatha taught at a private school. However, both cared for each of their students dearly. In *My Staggerford Journal*, Hassler notes, “I sensed how the rambunctious energy of Jeff Norquist, Beverly Bingham, Nadine Oppegaard, and Annie Bird (Fictional names for real-life prototypes) fueled my writing, made it sparkle” (Hassler, 7). Hassler tells the reader in his memoir that Agatha’s creation as a character arose as a result of an experience he had when one of his sons, Michael, was in elementary school. Michael’s teacher had brought in a poet as a guest speaker and the poet read some of his poems which included taboo words like ‘shit’. Hassler got mad and started complaining about the direction literature as a subject in schools was headed. Then it struck him that he was acting like a “rigid, old spinster, and at that point Agatha McGee stepped into [Jon Hassler’s] life” (Hassler, 8). This thought by Hassler contradicts with what Truesdale commented about Hassler’s writing style, that Hassler never

truly related to none of his characters. However, yet again, Hassler mentioned in *Conversations*, that Agatha is, “much like my mother” (88) and in a 1985 article from the *St. Cloud Visitor*, Hassler was quoted saying, “Nobody was troubled by the changes in the Church (during Vatican II) like I was. Boy, did I fight against them... It was amazing the change that came over me when I got [Agatha] as a substitute for myself. As she did the fighting, I didn’t have to anymore” (Plut, 83). One could say that many of the thoughts that Agatha has about the Church reflect Hassler’s own beliefs. For example, in an interview with Hassler, Plut asked, “*Upon learning that the Bishop no longer will visit individual parishes for confirmation, Agatha arranges to have twelve confirmands with their parents and sponsors travel to the bishop’s residence in Berrington for their confirmation. How much of this is based on fact?*” and Hassler responded with, “A similar event took place in the Duluth diocese when I live in Brainerd. The Bishop in Duluth decided that he wouldn’t confirm kids until they asked for it- I thought that was foolish, and so I threatened to take my daughter, who was an eighth grader at that point, up to Duluth, and I guess a lot of parents objected because he did send his representative to Brainerd to confirm them” (Plut 91).

I believe that the most important comparison is that both were Catholics. Being Catholic, they were taught to be compassionate, loving, and moral people. They were taught to understand that everyone has a special purpose and that, “no student was dull enough to be despaired of before school started” (Hassler, *A Green Journey*, 159). As such, they became teachers because they both had a special understanding of the person, a positive understanding. By becoming teachers, both gave back to his and her communities and affected and shaped the lives of many youth.

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Conclusion

Hassler’s fictional universe is complex and there are a range of issues that are presented in his Staggerford-based series of texts. Yet Hassler shows readers that even a rigid person like Agatha can change in thought given enough time. I have learned that love and compassion, just two of the many tenets of the Catholic faith, play an integral role in many Catholics’ lives. Compassion towards others has helped Agatha, a single woman, to remain connected and in touch with her local community. But is Agatha happy? I certainly think so. By demonstrating Groome’s traits, Agatha has found peace within herself as a Catholic and as a woman. Her tendencies to care for her friends and family such as Lillian and Frederick, led her to go on the trip to Ireland where she met James in person. Likewise, Hassler’s passion for teaching helped to improve his writing because he observed what his students did and that gave him inspiration to write. The reason Agatha can remain loyal to the Christian faith when she is constantly tempted to not follow the Catholic Catechisms is due to her ability to ultimately see the good in everyone. By helping everyone try to become better people, she herself continues to become a better person by reaffirming the good beliefs that she preaches. At the same time, by sticking closely to the traditions of the faith, she allows others to see the good, inherent value of being a Catholic.

Appendix A

Novels	Short Story Collections	Nonfiction	Children's Literature	Anthologized Stories
<i>Staggerford</i> (1977)	<i>Keepsakes and Other Stories</i> (2000)	<i>Saint John's in Pictures - Introduction</i> (1994)	<i>Four Miles to Pinecone</i> (1977)	<i>Inheriting the Land</i> , edited by Mark Vinz and Thom Tammaro ("The Undistinguished Poet", 1993)
<i>Simon's Night</i> (1979)	<i>Rufus at the Door and Other Stories</i> (2000)	<i>My Staggerford Journal</i> (1999)	<i>Jemmy</i> (novel) (1980)	<i>Imagining Home</i> , edited by Mark Vinz and Thom Tammaro ("Remembering Houses", 1995)
<i>The Love Hunter</i> (1981)		<i>Good People... from an Author's Life</i> (2001)		

<i>A Green Journey</i> (1985)		<i>Stories Teachers Tell</i> (2004)		
<i>Grand Opening</i> (1987)				
<i>North of Hope</i> (1990)				
<i>Dear James</i> (1993)				
<i>Rookery Blues</i> (1995)				
<i>The Dean's List</i> (1998)				
<i>The Staggerford Flood</i> (2002)				
<i>The Staggerford Murders</i> (2004)				
<i>The New Woman</i> (2005)				

Appendix B

1. A Positive Understanding of the Person

- God implanted a “natural law” inside everyone that enables that person to choose what is good. Everyone reflects the likeness of God and everyone has dignity and human life is inherently valuable.

2. Commitment to Community

- The personhood and community are one and the same. God created us to be communal beings who are responsible for each other. Catholics, Groome says, should live as “all for one, and one for all”.

3. Sacramental Outlook

- We should see God in all things. We must think that everything is a gift from God. God reaches out to us every day and so we must respond by continuing to do things as we would daily either through building relationships with one another or by continuing to give wholehearted efforts in our tasks. Our lives are meaningful and worthwhile because God gave us our lives.

4. Scripture and Tradition

- Catholics believe that *sola scripture* “scripture alone” is the source of God’s revelation. Thus, Catholics must listen to the Bishops and Priests in Church, that is by going to church, so that we can be taught the teachings of the Bible.

5. Holistic Faith

- Catholics should incorporate faith in every aspect of their life. They should live as Jesus would every day of the week as strong faith requires commitment in body, mind, and soul.

6. Commitment to Justice

- People should side with the poor and oppressed, favoring those whose justice is denied to them because in doing so, one is doing God's will "on earth as in heaven."

7. Universal Spirituality

- Catholic spirituality is everywhere in the world. One should share that spirituality, that is act in a way that Jesus would, with everyone whom one meets, both in one's own community and in the rest of the world. A Catholic should allow faith to "permeate" throughout one's whole life by doing daily prayers, being compassionate, and worshipping Christ.

8. Catholics are catholic

- To be catholic calls a community to welcome all people, regardless of their human circumstances. It demands that we reach out with love for everyone, neighbors next door and on the far side of the world to care without borders. It requires that we respect people with religions that are different from ours, being open to dialogue and learning from them. (Taken directly from *Nine things that make us Catholic*)

9. Devotion to Mary

- Catholics should continually ask for forgiveness for ways in which one has failed to live up to the Catholic faith just as Mary bore and raised Jesus yet failed to protect him when he was crucified.

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