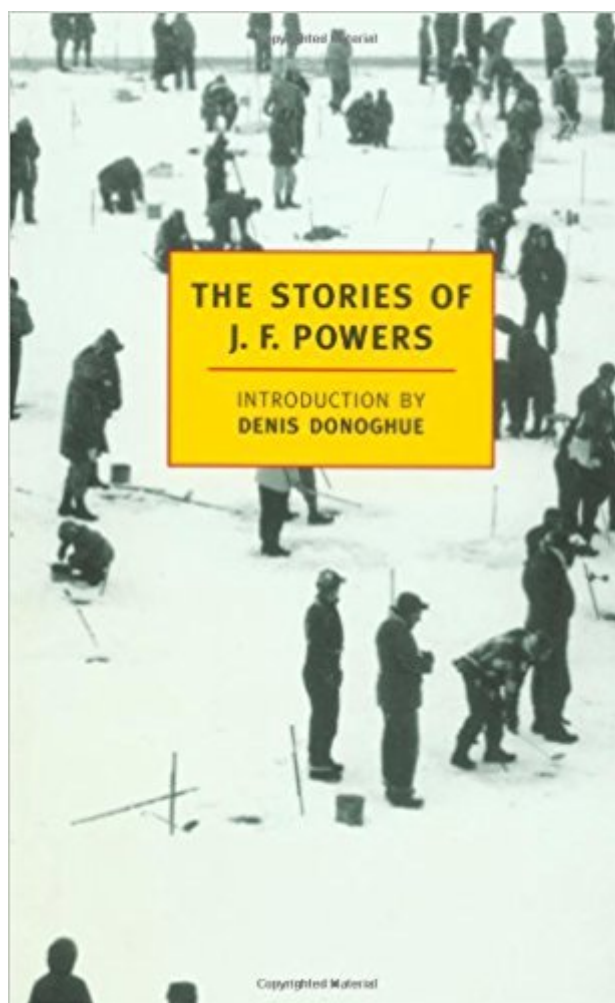


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The Stories Of J.F. Powers (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

Hailed by Frank O'Connor as one of "the greatest living storytellers," J. F. Powers, who died in 1999, stands with Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Raymond Carver among the authors who have given the short story an unmistakably American cast. In three slim collections of perfectly crafted stories, published over a period of some thirty years and brought together here in a single volume for the first time, Powers wrote about many things: baseball and jazz, race riots and lynchings, the Great Depression, and the flight to the suburbs. His greatest subject, however, and one that was uniquely his, was the life of priests in Chicago and the Midwest. Powers's thoroughly human priests, who include do-gooders, gladhandlers, wheeler-dealers, petty tyrants, and even the odd saint, struggle to keep up with the Joneses in a country unabashedly devoted to consumption. These beautifully written, deeply sympathetic, and very funny stories are an unforgettable record of the precarious balancing act that is American life.

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Customer Reviews

These wonderful stories mine the whole of American life, but Powers was at his best when he wrote about the very narrow slice of life that confines, constricts and defines the lives of Catholic priests. The comedy inherent in parish and church politics, the worldliness of men who have supposedly dedicated their lives to God, the loneliness of other men who have discovered that God is absent from most of their daily routine---these are Powers' favorite subjects, and in exploring them he produced some of the saddest and funniest stories to be found outside of Joyce's "Dubliners."

In a world where bestselling authors Joe Queenan, P.J. O'Rourke, Dave Barry, Christopher Buckley, and (God-forgive-me) Al Franken are hailed as leading humorists, there are three giants of American humor that are criminally underappreciated: Florence King, Jim Goad, and the late James Earl Powers. While King and Goad follow in the Rabelasian tradition of the better known humorists listed above, J.F. Powers wrote in a deep and subtle field of allusion and irony. His humor is poignant and instructive in a way that is both profoundly human, yet open to the face of the divine. The stories collected here also include Powers's tragic pieces, as well as other sketches and thinly disguised passages of his own family life. These are exemplary works, and perhaps the best examples of American writing ever produced, for Powers has often been called "the writer's writer" for the craft and care with which he chooses words. Attention has been paid to the fact that Powers was a Catholic writer, and there have been critics who strain to invoke comparison with Flannery O'Connor. For me the only points of tangency are that they were Catholics, were writers, wrote about humor and irony, but that is about it. Their voices create entirely different worlds, and their characters are hewn from different rock, and their anima sprouted from different soil. Powers is a distinctly different writer, speaking from a different landscape and with a plainness of style that invokes the Midwest and invites comparison with Willa Cather. But as William Faulkner said and wrote, Powers's subjects are circumscribed by "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing." And so we return to Powers's comedy. For his humor is deeply funny both for what is on the page, and for that which is unstated. Indeed, with a single sentence Powers creates paragraphs of detail in the reader's imagination; we have seen each of these people and each of these situations before, oftentimes in the mirror. But Powers is gentle, and gives us a kind of catharsis as we follow the bumbling path of flawed souls, venial, petty, and helpless, but not hopeless. If there is a counterpoint in American letters to which Powers should be compared, then I suggest H.L. Mencken, for in many ways Powers is the answer to Mencken, for all which he found contemptible, Powers has also found funny, but more importantly sacred. Mencken's American cynicism and misanthropy have been answered by Powers with prose that is

his match, and a literary redemption of the common soul that could only have been inspired by both a love of man and a love of the written word. Until the Library of America recognizes Powers for the giant of American writing that he is, we will have to be content with this edition. A pity, for the binding is poor, and already sections are falling out of my copy. From heaven, Powers must observe this condition with the wry and ironic amusement to which, during his earthly life, he gave voice.

I have reviewed on the earlier collections in their original format, "Prince of Darkness" (1947) and "Presence of Grace," (1956) as well as the novel "Morte d'Urban" (1962). The collected three thin volumes, thirty stories total, are reprinted as "The Stories of J.F. Powers" in 2001 from NY Review Press, as well as reissues of the two novels. As another reviewer on here noted, I too prefer the original volumes, but the fact that NY Review Press has reprinted the five books (the two novels and this anthology) in handsome editions after Powers (1917-99) languished as a cult favorite and, curse and blessing for him, status as a "writer's writer" who took years to create, it seems, a single story, judging from over forty years and the small shelf of five thin books as originally printed 1947-88. Denis Donaghue provides an efficient introduction to this rather prickly author, whose moral backbone, no-nonsense manner, and ear for the telling phrase and the revealing pause made him one of America's most talented recorders of fictional priests, laity, and in two great stories a cat as the narrator of Midwestern foibles, dreamers, and ordinary folks, whether in rectories or social halls. His best stories do involve the clergy, as any reader of Powers will recognize, but these at their best emerge more vividly when included among the lesser attempts at themes such as baseball, the space race, race relations, wife-swapping, and a chillingly rendered Welcome Wagon lady. Powers took his good time writing these stories, so take yours reading them. If you would like more advice on each of the thirty, take a look at my reviews of "Prince," "Presence," and "Look." There, I briefly comment upon each story in the order they were originally printed. This anthology preserves this order, but outside of an introduction adds no new stories to the small but, if you take the best of the clergy stories, memorable tales. As Powers explained why he as a layman wrote about clerics: a man taking out an insurance policy provides no real tension usually. But when a priest takes out an insurance policy, you have material for a story...

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