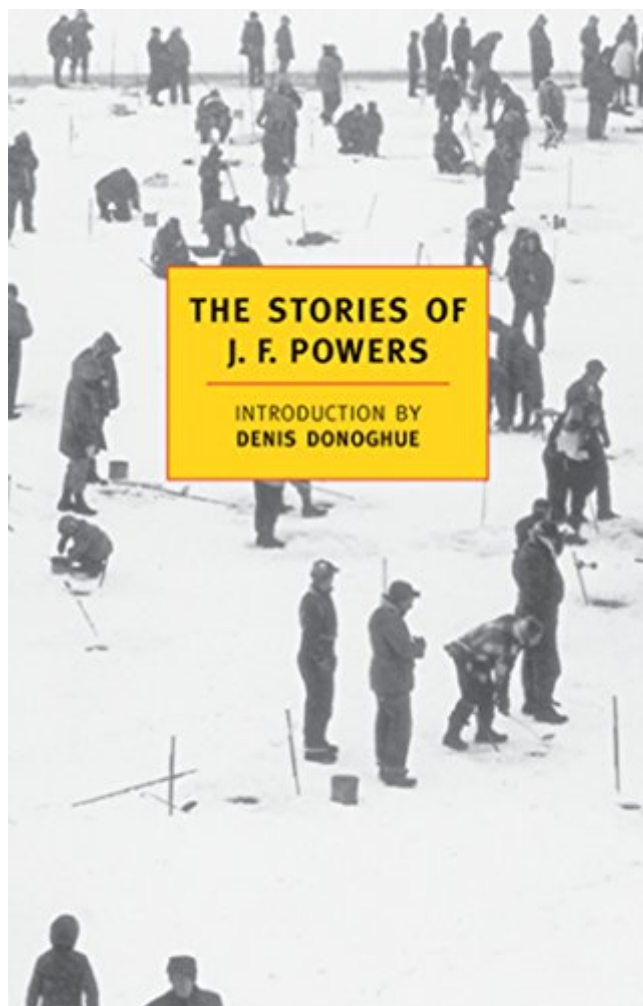


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The Stories Of J.F. Powers (New York Review Books Classics)



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, gladhanders, 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

THE STORIES OF J.F. POWERS is a book to treasure. Powers died in 1999, but his reputation as perhaps the greatest comic chronicler of the 1950s Catholic Church endures. He published only five books in a career that spanned over five decades. Three of them were slim collections of short stories, all of which are included in this handsome volume. The other two were novels. The first, MORTE D'URBAN, a book I have read and reread at least four times, each time with much chuckling and great enjoyment, won the National Book Award in 1962. The second, WHEAT THAT SPRINGETH GREEN (1988), I read just a few years ago. Again, much chuckling, a pure pleasure to read. Because he was a perfectionist, Powers worked slowly. His resulting stories were, to my mind, perfect. His subject? The Catholic Church, its clergy and religious, and its faithful members in the mid-twentieth century Midwest. In these stories his priests, nuns and parishioners are presented in thoroughly human terms, warts and all. Catholics from that era cannot help but relate. They will smirk, smile, chuckle, guffaw. The humor sneaks up on you, surprises you into laughter. I can remember, as a child, seeing Powers' first book, PRINCE OF DARKNESS AND OTHER STORIES (1947), a slim paperback in a rack of religious books and pamphlets in the back of our church. My mother, always an avid reader, must have bought it, because I discovered it in our home bookcase my senior year of high school. One story and I was hooked. I probably didn't realize it then, but I had discovered buried treasure. I am so pleased that NYRB has made all of Powers' stories finally available in a single volume. I had read his final collection, HOW THE FISHES LIVE (1975), but not the middle one. THE PRESENCE OF GRACE (1956). Now I have, and I will continue sampling these stories for a long time. It's the kind of book you can open anywhere, to any story. Every one is perfect, complete, a finely polished gem. My highest recommendation.- Tim Bazzett, author of the memoir, BOOKLOVER

Love the writing and the characters are real, I just know it.

master of short fiction ...

Powers is just amazing! He was never published here in my country, and Brazil is missing such sagacity and delicacy. "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" keeps coming back to my read, always telling something new, that i still can't dare do try another story!

J.F. Powers is a well-kept secret from many readers, who will delight if they encounter his work--two novels and now, these stories.

Powers stories are crafted with sardonic realism and an ear for the "language" of Catholic priests. I first read these stories in the 1950's and am delighted to have a Kindle version of the New York Review of books edition. Perfect when reading time is limited.

Advertised as used, condition good, the book was actually in almost new condition. Having paid for only standard shipping, I was thrilled to receive my book in what had to be record time. I will look for this vendor each time I need/want a book. I couldn't be more pleased.

For this review I concentrate on J. F. Powers' priestly stories which comprise two thirds or so of the book's contents. The tribulations of the Roman Catholic priesthood is a major concern of fiction. Powers was admired by his literary peers for his proficiency in the short story. One of his two novels won a National Book Award, but he is generally considered a short fiction master who occasionally turned out a novel than vice versa. In the major elements of fiction writing he is adept. He gives his characters a presence; he renders settings with clarity and impact; and bestows on the milieu his tales takes place in, a strong sense of authenticity. He has been called a writer's writer, a praise that signifies a close study of his works helps one learn the craft of story writing. An overview of the priestly stories suggest to me Powers is a pessimist about the efficacy of the vocation at the parish level. He is not the first Roman Catholic to reprove his/her church. Joyce comes to mind in that regard. Only Powers imparts an aura not so much of distaste but of regret. Here are men of the cloth who want to fulfill the broader duties of compassion and succor to the laity but find themselves mired in intra politics and convention. The incidents of conflict are small in scale but large in implication. Story after story of petty intrigue and contention add up to a bleak regard of priesthood functioning at a parochial level. Despite the amount of detail pertinent to the nitty-gritty of parish activity, the stories emanate I get an impression of corporate politics in priestly garb. Yet the author's tone isn't scathing; more a brooding contemplation such as suggested by the painting of Jesus pondering Jerusalem from a hill side. Powers, like any pessimist, is a disappointed idealist. I think the collection is rather uneven because "Moonshot" is formatted as a one act play, and "Folks" in the form of a short letter between a preface and an after word is puzzling as to how a reader is to take it. A brief comment on the author. Powers never wore a priest's cloth, though he did attend Catholic seminary and worked in a Catholic associated university. He included several priests among his best friends. From comments by those who knew him I gather he wasn't a constant writer in

the sense of Trollope with his one thousand words a day timed to two hundred and fifty words every quarter hour. Rather Powers was a fitful writer whose stints at composition occurred between intervals of sundry activities. One started on a story though he was dogged in its completion. He revised copiously until, as his daughter put it, the pile of pages had the density of a plank. Between stories he wrote miles of letters. His daughter Katherine has compiled them in a book the title of which "Suitable Accommodations" comes from a favorite expression of her father who was rather nomadic in his choice of residences.. Her preface provides considerable background on a well loved father. From it I drew the above remarks.

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