

MORTE D'URBAN

J. F. Powers



Introduction by

ELIZABETH HARDWICK

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MORTE D'URBAN

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

J. F. POWERS'S *Morte D'Urban* creates an American scene of striking individuality: Roman Catholic priests in a woebegone village in Minnesota. That is the general subject and setting, but the outstanding quality and vividness of the novel is in the composition, the mastery of detail, the wit of the teller, the placing of the characters, each in his fore-ordained spot in the Church hierarchy. The clash of innate disposition with the surrounding blanket of the special vocation gives rise to comic misadventures, disappointments, competitions within the lightly cloistered world each of the priests has entered with the solemnity of his choice of vocation.

Father Urban, born Harvey Roche in Abe Lincoln's Illinois, a Catholic surrounded by Protestants who thought the country "handed down to them by the Pilgrims, George Washington, and others, and that they were taking a risk in letting you live in it." The you, the risk, was Catholics with their fancy vestments, their intoning in Latin, burning incense, and throwing holy water around. The young Harvey Roche, while acting as

chauffeur for a renowned, modern, extroverted priest, Father Placidus, is inspired not only to take his own vows but to cherish the memory of Father Placidus by an inclination for the worldly pleasures and plums of position the old Father had annexed for himself in his practice of the vocation. That is, staying in good hotels while traveling, bending a glass in first-class restaurants, taking in a performance of *Mlle. Modiste*, organizing boys' choirs and basketball teams; altogether cutting a benign and pleasant figure in the world.

Father Urban has risen in the rather unimpressive Order of St Clement in Chicago by a whirl of traveling and preaching around the country. He is a star on the religion circuit, an ambitious man who expects, when his turn comes about, to be made head of the Chicago branch of the Order. He has ideas for the future of the group; ideas practical on the one hand and intellectually serious on the other hand. "It seemed to him that the Order of St Clement labored under the curse of mediocrity, and had done so almost from the beginning. . . . The Clementines were unique in that they were noted for nothing at all."

Instead, Father Boniface, the reigning priest in Chicago, has other plans for Father Urban, whom he doesn't much like.

Men like Father Boniface talked of "beefing up" the Order, but Father Urban had another idea—to raise the *tone* by packing the Novitiate with exceptional men. He had overshot the mark on occasion—two of his recruits had proved to be homosexual and one homicidal. . . . But there were three or four lads out at the Novitiate, superior lads hanging on for dear life in difficult surroundings. What hope Father Urban had for the Order was in them, and in a few others younger than himself but safely ordained, and in himself.

Father Boniface would see about that, if such is the way to express it. In any case, Father Urban, who is on his way to give one of his rousing appearances in St Paul, is handed a letter relieving him of his traveling and dramatic proselytizing and assigning him to the newest "white elephant," a foundation near Duesterhaus, Minnesota. That is the plot. The demotion is called "giving the green banana."

The St Clement community in the cold, windy, inhospitable Duesterhaus is poor, inefficient, penny-pinching, occupied with housekeeping and house-mending chores in a rickety old building, not long ago used as the local poorhouse. Matters under intense discussion will be whether to make a person-to-person call or to save on a station call. Housed there with Father Urban are a number of brilliantly imagined, resolutely unimaginative, characters who will be his companions in the practice of his difficult calling.

Chief among these is Father Wilfrid, called Wilf. In his pedantic way, Wilf has organized the days as an endless chore of painting bits here and there, worrying about varnishing the floors, about too much use of electricity even for a kitchen appliance which itself is an unnecessary extravagance in his view. Wilf has no heart for the utility of calling a floor-sander or for getting the help of a local electrician when the power goes off, as it often does.

The weeks and months go by with the priests to make out or make do as if they had come across the plains in the time of the covered wagon. Father Urban offers hesitant practical suggestions which are drowned in a pedantry of thrift likely soon to incur expense. He receives a few speaking invitations, one to appear at the annual Poinsettia Smorgasbord, a non-Catholic audience which will discuss "Putting Christ Back into Christmas." The matter of the infallibility of the Pope comes up with the coffee and Father Urban tosses off the assurance that infallibility does not include being able to predict rain.

The genial public appearance is covered in the local papers and pronounced a success, but there is no mention of it by Father Wilf even though he has been much concerned to make the community take notice of the Order. Perhaps a worm of jealousy in the rock-strewn soil.

The priests are in no way unworthy of their calling. What Powers brings to them is their humanity, their little tics of personality that do not vanish with ordination. Father Wilfrid is a sort of countertheme to Father Urban. Wilf is fussy, occupied with particulars, thrifty, a natural manager of petty detail, which in fact is a good deal of the business of the Order. Father Urban is a creation of great complexity; he is polite, not insistent in his dealings with his fellow priests even though his sense of things is at variance. He wants to expand the range of the Church; he's even a bit of a Rotarian, but experience has taught him that the Catholic Church is not quite to be "rated second only to Standard Oil in efficiency, as *Time* had reported a few years back."

He has dealt in his soul with two secular, rich Catholics who will form part of the plot in the obscure clerical landscape. One, a man named Billy Cosgrove, has inadvertently made the acquaintance of Father Urban and thereby the Order. He's a curious, frenetic fellow of almost unaccountable generosity. When he sees the modest, run-down Novitiate in Chicago, he arranges on the spot for removal to better quarters. In Duesterhaus, the Order's rusty old truck offends him and on the spot he buys them a new car. When he discovers, at a remote lodge, that his favorite piano has been sold, he has a new one trucked in that night. Father Urban is from the first appalled by Billy, but his offerings, which will include a bit of land and the making of a golf course, can scarcely be denied. The golf course is to attract retreatants who like a bit of pleasure and exercise with their spiritual renewal.

The golf course, which will go along its mossy green way,

plays an almost satanic role in Father Urban's life. As a master golfer, he is brought to play with a cantankerous Bishop, who is not nearly as deft with the game as he believes himself to be. Conflict there on the green. One of the Bishop's mis-hit balls delivers a serious injury to Father Urban's head. On a fishing expedition, Billy Cosgrove, annoyed by Father Urban's mild rebuke for atrocious behavior, pushes him overboard and takes off to leave him to fend for himself. Billy stops payment on the new car, undermines the lease on the new quarters in Chicago—indeed, takes back all his mad acts of giving. Mrs Thwaite, the other possible big donor for the Order, mistreats her young Irish serving girl by beating her at dominoes and taking the girl's losses out of her wages, thereby leaving her destitute. Father Urban's woes, spiritual and physical, accumulate just as he is at last given his heart's wish to be called back to his beloved Chicago and elevated to the long-cherished position of Provincial of the Order. Back to the Pump Room for flaming shishkabob and wine with a visiting dignitary.

But it is too late. He has been shaken by life. The world is confusion and contradiction, simplicity and connivance; his sophistication has been at every point overwhelmed by expediency, by the compliance intrinsic to his role. His headaches arrive and depart like sections of the Twentieth Century Limited. What began as a comedy of manners—clerical manners—has turned into a sad morality drama. He who had traveled with such aplomb out of Chicago as a valuable spokesman with a national reputation has lost the energy and assurance for his new post. In the end, he comes to think of the icy, wind-swept, down-at-the-heels backwater Duesterhaus, Minnesota, as his rightful home.

Morte D'Urban won the National Book Award for 1963. Many, myself among them, can remember J.F. Powers's first appearance when his story "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" was published in *Accent*, a small literary magazine, in 1943. It

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was clear that he was a special, notable talent, one who brought an angular, fresh, and important new voice to American letters. Powers was born in Minnesota and born into the Catholic Church. He's an American cradle-Catholic writer, forever down-home alert to the plodding demands made on an ancient church in a new, go-go country. In that way his work differs from the brilliant, somewhat prideful annunciations of convert writers like Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. Powers's characters are hardy, sometimes hard, locals who do not bring to mind the lady of the manor and her toadying vicar in the novels of Trollope's Anglican Church. Father Urban is the son of American roots. It has been said of Mexico that it is too far from God and too close to the United States. Father Urban is too far from Rome and too close to rural Minnesota. And that is the inspiration of this most valuable and lasting American novel.

—ELIZABETH HARDWICK

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CLASSICS

M O R T E D ' U R B A N

J. F. POWERS (1917–1999) was born in Jacksonville, Illinois, and studied at Northwestern University while holding a variety of jobs in Chicago and working on his writing. He published his first stories in *The Catholic Worker* and, as a pacifist, spent thirteen months in prison during World War II. Powers was the author of three collections of short stories and two novels—*Morte D'Urban*, which won the National Book Award, and *Wheat That Springeth Green*—all of which have been reissued by New York Review Books. He lived in Ireland and the United States and taught for many years at St John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota.

ELIZABETH HARDWICK is the author of three novels, four collections of essays, and a biography of Herman Melville.