



**THE STORIES OF
J. F. POWERS**

**INTRODUCTION BY
DENIS DONOGHUE**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

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J. F. POWERS

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.

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

HE WAS James Farl Powers on his birth certificate and Jim Powers to his friends. In the history of modern fiction J.F. Powers (1917–1999) was a distinctive figure, a loner, emerging from quietness every few years when he published a book or won a prize, but otherwise content to mind his own professional business. He is sometimes described as a writer's writer, meaning that he was an artist too good to gratify the most casual reader, but he was also a reader's writer, if we assume a reader who thinks of fiction as intelligent art rather than low entertainment. Such writers tend not to be abundant, they work hard on their sentences. Powers published only a few books—three collections of short stories, *Prince of Darkness, and Other Stories* (1947), *The Presence of Grace* (1956), and *Look How the Fish Live* (1975), the contents of which have been gathered in this volume, and two novels, *Morte D'Urban* (1962) and *Wheat that Springeth Green* (1988). But these are treasured, guarded with jealousy by those who know of them. News of their quality is passed from one adept to another, like

word of an idyllic village in an unfashionable part of France, not to be disclosed to the ordinary camera-flashing tourist. Now that Powers is dead, he has become his admirers, as W. H. Auden said of the poet Yeats.

I met Powers only once. He and his wife and children lived for several years in Ireland, in a small seaside town about seventeen miles south of Dublin called Greystones. (It is clearly the Ballydoo of his short story "Tinkers.") He rarely left the town, even to sample the joys of Dublin. But he became friends with the Irish novelist and short-story writer Sean O'Faolain, who lived a few miles away in an even more salubrious place, Killiney. I lived in Mount Merrion, a suburb on the south side of Dublin. My social life was meager, so I accepted with enthusiasm an invitation from O'Faolain to come to lunch in Killiney. Jim Powers would be there.

I reached Killiney rather early. Before Powers arrived, O'Faolain passed the time making mild fun of him. Did I know that Powers spent the morning putting in a comma and the afternoon wondering whether or not he should replace it with a semicolon? O'Faolain's teasing didn't stop when Powers rang the doorbell. "I've been telling Donoghue about your attentiveness to commas and semicolons." Powers smiled and indicated by his silence that he was not inclined to argue the question. O'Faolain was an amiable host, and a good writer when he cared to be, but I'm sure he never worried about the relative merits of a comma and a semicolon. It was said that he wrote two thousand words a day whether he felt well or ill. I recall nothing of the conversation at lunch, beyond an impression that O'Faolain, his wife Eileen, and I talked a lot and to no memorable purpose. Powers nodded his head from time to time, either in agreement on the point being made or to indicate the degree of his indifference to the issue.

Morte D'Urban won the National Book Award in 1963 and gained for Powers recognition as a novelist. But he seems to

me by native gift a short-story writer. I recall getting a letter from the poet William Carlos Williams in which he said that writers have each their own natural breath. Some take short breaths, others long. Whitman took long breaths, Emily Dickinson short ones. It required talent to judge what your natural form of breathing was. I think Powers knew that his native breath was that of the short story. He tried for the longer breath of the novel twice because, I assume, he wanted to deal with a bigger cast of characters and a wider screen. But I think his talent was happiest in the concentration, the focus, of the short story. It was as if he thought life most clearly disclosed in the telling anecdote.

In one of the prefaces to the New York edition of his fiction, Henry James spoke of his experience in writing short stories. He recalled that his "struggle to keep compression rich, if not, better still, to keep accretions compressed, betrayed for me such community with the anxious effort of some warden of the insane engaged at a critical moment in making fast a victim's straitjacket." James was exhilarated by the restriction. He was stirred by the necessity of "treating a theme that 'gave' much in a form that, at the best, would give little." He was inclined to follow the anecdote from which the little story arose "as much as possible from its outer edge in, rather than from its center outward." He accepted the anecdote for what it was, trying always to keep the possible accretions compressed.

Powers observed the same formal policy. The outer edge was for him the everyday visible world, full of rectories, priests, housekeepers, cars, cats, parishioners. The center, however, bristled with little disclosures, nuances of personality, prejudice, and mood. In "The Valiant Woman" Father Firman wants to get rid of his housekeeper, Mrs Stoner. She is a holy terror, a predictable aggravation, runs his life for him, gives him minor hell. But he knows that he can't get rid of her. The oppressive thought occurs to him that she treats him as if she were his

wife; except that she sleeps in the guest room. Every evening, before going to bed, they play cards: "the final murderous hour in which all they wanted to say—all he wouldn't and all she couldn't—came out in the cards." Mrs Stoner always wins. "Skunked you! . . . Had enough, huh!" From the outside in: all the possibilities are contained in the scene as given, including the rage with which Father Firman, in his bedroom last thing one night, tries to swat a mosquito, misses, and smashes the statue of St Joseph on the bookcase. Powers compresses the embarrassments of a lifetime into a few episodes. The story he tells is not just short; it delights in its brevity.

The tragicomedy of these stories about priests arises from a further constraint that Powers imposes on himself. The priests are shown in the world, quarreling with their colleagues and pastors, grubbing for money, angling for promotion, playing golf, drinking beer, passing the time. If they have an intense spiritual life, we are not shown it. We are not told what it means that as young men they responded to a vocation, a calling. We don't see them in their relation to God. Might they just as well have become insurance agents? Not quite. French fiction on similar themes—that of Mauriac, Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest*—is deeply preoccupied with the inner life, with consciences, temptations, and doubts, with religious and moral scruples. But in Powers's stories and novels the spiritual atmosphere is entirely different; it is not expressed but implied. His priests are small people in a big world, and he never forgets the spaciousness of that world, so strongly felt in the Midwest where many of the stories are set, in his concentration upon them. But they are not little in the eyes of God. Powers impresses upon us that no matter how commonplace or compromised the priest there is still a relation between him and the Christian vision he has acknowledged.

In "One of Them" the curate, Father Simpson, has long tried to extract from the pastor a spare key for the front door of

the rectory. The pastor is going away for a few days, and the question of a key arises again over the dinner table. As usual, the pastor has left an edifying pamphlet on Father Simpson's plate, without comment:

"Father," said Simpson, coming to dessert, and remembering how he'd phrased the question before ("Father, how long will you be gone?") rephrased it, "will you be gone long?"

"Not long," said the pastor, as before.

"Father," said Simpson when he'd eaten his peaches, "while you're away, if I have to go out at night—hospital or something—and the church is locked, I can knock or ring, I know, but I'd hate to disturb Ms Burke, if you know what I mean, Father?"

The pastor nodded, as if he did know, but bowed his head in silent grace.

So did Simpson then, and, when they rose from the table, did not forget the pamphlet by his plate. "So I should knock or ring, Father?"

"Ring," said the pastor.

It is the priests' pretense that every constituent of their lives is transparent that gives this exchange its comic poignancy: "... but bowed his head in silent grace." Look how the fish live: look how the priests live. What has happened to the impulses and the spiritual visitations, the qualms and scruples, that must have directed curate and pastor in earlier years toward the priesthood? And now they are embroiled in a little play of power about a key. Was it for this that Christ was crucified and Paul set up a church? James, in writing "The Turn of the Screw," determined that instead of supplying instances of the evil deeds of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, he would "make the reader *think* the evil." "Make him think it for

himself, and you are released from weak specifications." Similarly, Powers—precisely by keeping everything he shows visible, external, and conventional—makes the reader think the forces that are not on show, the spiritual experiences that started out so compellingly and have issued in these penuries.

Not all of these stories are about priests. My favorite story, "Renner," is entirely secular: we are shown an eating house in a Midwestern city. There are seven characters: the narrator, his colleague Renner, the waiter Emil, a patron named Ross, a not-entirely-sober Irishman, a German, and "the fat one." Nothing much happens, there is no plot, there are no dramatic climaxes or crises. Some of the characters are merely playing cards at a table. They are nearly anonymous. But they, and the lives they lead, are revealed by small gestures and silences, minute changes of tone. It is not a typical story of Powers's. His talent may have been startled to find itself taking this form. But the story is, in its quiet way, thrilling. The first time I read it, I knew I was reading the work of a master. A work of literature is a book you'd be happy to read again and again—like the book in your hand.

—DENIS DONOGHUE