J. F. Powers (1917-1999)
Cassandra Nelson (Harvard University)

Novelist; Story-writer.
Active 1943-1988 in United States

Though his writing has since become something of a well-kept secret, known and treasured by only a few, J. F. Powers was arguably the most famous Catholic writer in the United States at mid-twentieth century. The term “Catholic writer” was one he disliked, whether applied to François Mauriac or Evelyn Waugh (for more than that, they were writers); or to himself (Malloy 2). While his reputation as a specialist in the clerical idiom has undoubtedly and unfortunately played a role in his relative obscurity today, there can be no denying that the greatest concentration of his talent is to be found just there, in his short stories and two novels about the lives of clergy in the American Midwest. In other stories (“Look How the Fish Live”, “The Old Bird, A Love Story”, and “Renner” perhaps foremost among them) Powers moves adroitly through a variety of secular milieus, but the figure of the priest was one to which he returned time and again, as a shortcut of sorts, believing that characters with one foot in this world and one in the next brought the great themes of literature into sharp, immediate relief.

Born July 8, 1917 in Jacksonville, Illinois, and christened James Farl, he was the eldest of three children belonging to James Ansbury Powers, a talented pianist who abandoned music for a career in business, working as a manager at Swift & Company, and Zella Routzong Powers. With the exception of his earliest elementary years, Powers was educated in Catholic schools. He graduated from Quincy College Academy, a Franciscan school, in 1935, and afterwards moved to Chicago in search of a job. He soon left again, embarking on a yearlong driving tour of the South and Southwest as chauffeur to a wealthy investor.

On his return, Powers worked for a time at Marshall Field’s department store (an experience that convinced him he was constitutionally unsuited for sales) before being hired as an editor with the Chicago Historical Records Survey. It paid well enough for him to enroll in night classes at Northwestern University and to arrange for private French lessons on his own. At Northwestern, he took a composition class with lexicographer Bergen Evans (later famous as an “expert authority for television’s The $64,000 Question”) and considered majoring in philosophy, but was forced to abandon his studies without a degree when the survey was completed in 1941.
Another attempt at retail ended abruptly when Powers was fired from Brentano’s bookstore for refusing to buy war bonds. A pacifist denied conscientious objector status during World War II, he was imprisoned in October 1943 for failing to report for induction. His time in jail and the shame it brought his parents were to profoundly shade his view of the United States. More than fifty years later, he could state without hesitation the exact length of his stay at Sandstone, a federal prison in Minnesota—thirteen months and twenty-three days—after which he was paroled to work as a hospital orderly in St. Paul (Northern Lights).

Powers’s antiwar sentiment was closely linked to his religious beliefs. In early 1943 he had been allowed to join a priests’ retreat at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. It proved to be a formative experience. Immediately afterwards he wrote “Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does,” which was published that fall to wide acclaim in the literary magazine Accent and is still considered one of his finest stories for its poignant account of an aged priest searching for spiritual peace in his last days and instead finding himself: “beset by the grossest distractions. They were to be expected, he knew, as indelible in the order of things: the bingo game going on under the cross for the seamless garment of the Son of Man: everywhere the sign of the contradiction, and always” (Prince of Darkness 61).

The story received an O. Henry Award and was included in a number of anthologies, among them one edited by Sister Mariella Gable, an influential critic and English professor at the College of St. Benedict (sister school of St. John’s University, affiliated with the abbey where Powers had gone on retreat). In November 1945, Sister Mariella introduced him to Betty Wahl, a recent graduate of St. Benedict’s who was herself a fledgling story writer and novelist. Within days, the two were engaged. They married on April 22, 1946.

The following summer saw the couple at Yaddo, a writers’ colony in upstate New York where Powers completed work on Prince of Darkness and Other Stories. In it, his mastery of the form was already apparent. Divided about equally between secular and clerical subject matter, the stories feature, among others, a failed priest in his fifties still waiting for a parish of his own (whose nickname provides the collection with its title); a young boy shocked by the fall of his baseball player hero; an African-American jazz player cruelly patronized by white listeners; and an elderly man at once grateful and ashamed to find work in the mailroom of a toy company:

For an instant Mr. Newman succeeded in making it plain that he, like any man of his business experience, was meant for better things. A moment later, in an interesting ceremony which took place in his heart, Mr. Newman surrendered his well-loved white collar. He knew that Mr. Shanahan, with that dark vision peculiar to personnel men, had witnessed the whole thing. (168)

Highly praised on both sides of the Atlantic, Prince of Darkness paved the way for subsequent stories to appear in more prestigious, better paying periodicals.
Even so, it was difficult to raise five children on sales of his fiction alone. To stretch their savings, Powers and his wife moved their family to Ireland four separate times, spending a total of thirteen years abroad between 1951 and 1975. The countryside around Dublin offered beautiful scenery and more rigorous schools, as well as a respect for culture and tradition that they believed to be in increasingly short supply at home. These departures were a deliberate attempt to escape the provincialism of Minnesota life and to counter their feelings of alienation from the United States, where they saw themselves everywhere surrounded by changing values and declining standards.

Other times, Powers accepted teaching positions to make ends meet—a two-year appointment at Marquette University beginning in 1949, a semester at the University of Michigan in 1956, and a year as writer-in-residence at Smith College from 1965 to 1966. His longest appointment, at St. John’s University, lasted from 1975 until his retirement as Regents Professor Emeritus in 1993. An eminently quotable lecturer, Powers once waved an advice-column clipping in the air and told students it was the raw material of fiction: “This is your cotton growing in the fields. Take it and make a shirt” (Hassler 87).

His own work was produced by means of a notoriously slow and laborious process of composition. Averaging one published book per decade, Powers took infinite pains with his prose—cutting mercilessly, revising endlessly, and starting over from scratch if need be. The result is a small but unerring body of work comprising three story collections and two novels. His second and third collections, *The Presence of Grace* (1955) and *Look How the Fish Live* (1975), further assured his place among the greatest American story writers, although critical accolades for the most part failed to translate into commercial success.

In *The Presence of Grace*, Powers introduced the fictional Order of Saint Clement—unique in that they were noted for nothing at all—from whose ranks the protagonist of his first novel would be drawn (*Morte D’Urban* 19). A bright star among the Clementines, Father Urban Roche is a popular, charismatic, and slightly arrogant priest who finds himself exiled to an out of the way retreat house in rural Minnesota. Frustrated by what he sees as wasted talent—his own and the order’s—he builds a golf course on the site. He is, like many of Powers’s priests, a businessman manqué: employed by a Church ranked second only to Standard Oil in efficiency and more often preoccupied with hobnobbing, timeserving, and petty one-upsmanship than with the business of saving souls (117). *Morte D’Urban* went on to win the National Book Award in 1963 against competitors including Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, Katherine Anne Porter’s *Ship of Fools*, and John Updike’s *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*.

Powers’s second novel, *Wheat That Springeth Green*, was nominated for the National Book Award in 1988. A quarter of a century in the making, it was to be his last published work. He died in 1999 at his home in Minnesota. With terrible irony, given the avid critical reception his fiction consistently received, Powers’s books were out of print at the time of his death.
Both novels and a volume of his collected stories have since been reissued by New York Review Books, though there remains a misperception that they hold appeal solely for Catholic readers. Powers flatly rejected this notion, asking one interviewer, “Would you call *The Wind in the Willows* a book for animals?” (Malloy 8). Instead he wrote, as serious writers do, for his peers and, in this respect, achieved great success, with Saul Bellow, Frank O’Connor, and Seán O’Faoláin among his most enthusiastic admirers and for serious readers. “I quite often look at it from the view of posterity,” Powers said in June 1963, after accepting the National Book Award. “Everything I write now I hope will stand up, become part of my little canon” (Malloy 15).

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