Andrew M. Greeley

J.F. POWERS R.I.P.

Catholic storyteller

On a Sunday afternoon in the mid 1960s, I turned on the Chicago fine-arts station in my car radio and heard a gently amused voice discussing J. F. Powers's novel *Morte D'Urban*. It was soon obvious that the voice belonged to the author. He seemed a man very like the stories he wrote—wry, sad, funny, wistful, and hopeful. He told us how he missed Urban now that the story was finally written. I hung on every word. I had read each of Powers's stories as soon as they appeared and was delighted that both the man and his words seemed to confirm what I felt about the stories. Here was indeed a Catholic storyteller in an era when the wise Catholic critics of both the right and the left were saying that there could be no such thing.

That interview flashed through my imagination when I heard of Powers's death on June 12. He was the last of the great trinity of mid-century (Irish) Catholic storytellers that broke through the barriers of the American literary world in those years, Edwin O'Connor, with his prize-winning novels, and Flannery O'Connor, with her highly acclaimed short stories, being the other two. Their success came just at the time that self-critics within the Catholic community were lamenting the lack of (Irish) Catholic cultural achievements. Now hardly anyone would claim that all three writers were not uniquely Catholic, storytellers in the tradition of what David Tracy has dubbed the analogical imagination, an imagination which as Powers hinted in the title of one of his collections, is aware of "the presence of grace."

Powers is a Catholic storyteller not merely because he wrote about priests or about midwestern Catholicism but because he was acutely aware of the presence of grace and cared deeply about the salvation of his characters (as do his colleague at Saint John's University Jon Hassler and the English novelist David Lodge). Even his character Urban, shallow ecclesiastical operator that he is, cannot escape the transforming touch of grace.

Some of Powers's early stories were about a city very much like Chicago (and a parish very much like Our Lady of Lourdes on Ashland Avenue), but his milieu eventually became that of the upper tier of states, the Catholicism of Saint John's Abbey, of the "Clementine" fathers, of Eugene McCarthy and Colman Barry and Godfrey Diekmann, of the dioceses (as he called them) of Duesterhaus and Ostrogothenberg, of the Strafe brothers and their paper *The Drover*.

He was a legend among the Johnies (as the students at Collegeville are called). He worked in a room over Benét Hall with a large glass window, out of which he stared at the campus, on some days from dawn to dusk, searching for just the right word. Sometimes, it was said, he needed a whole week to write a single sentence. My nephew Dan Durkin took a one-on-one course on short-story writing from Powers, and on hearing of his death wrote: "I have no doubt his spirit still shuffles, pauses, leans in the dusty attic tower of Benét Hall. I have no doubt if you want to listen, in the quiet, you'll still hear the soft slow click of his IBM Selectric."

One might lament that Powers's *oeuvre* is so small, only five slender volumes. Yet we must permit storytellers to work at their own pace, and rejoice that we have those five volumes which so brilliantly record the presence of grace in the Catholicism of the middle of the century.

How, it was often asked, did Powers know so much about priests? He must have lived in a rectory, it was suggested. Or perhaps priests who were his friends told him tales out of school. My guess is that his priests were creatures of a vivid, sympathetic, and unerring imagination, and that Powers worked with bits and pieces of clerical everyday life that he would pick up, as it were, on the fly. Moreover, around Saint John's there were plenty of pieces to pick up. Powers had us down cold and was perhaps too kind to us. However, he wanted us, like Urban, to be touched by grace.

Some say that Powers lost touch with the clergy of the years after Vatican II. I disagree. His final stories captured perfectly the effort of men trying to convince themselves that nothing had really changed when in fact everything had changed.

We will miss him. We will never again pick up a *New Yorker*, hoping against hope to find one of his stories. He was a Catholic to his fingertips, gentle and kind, whimsical and melancholy, and tough enough to do time in Sandstone Prison as a conscientious objector during World War II. He has now achieved the salvation he wanted for all his characters: He is in the presence of Grace. □

The Reverend Andrew M. Greeley *is a novelist from Chicago.*

Throughout 1999, Commonweal *will be celebrating its 75th anniversary. Here from the August 5, 1949 issue is "Short and Select" by the late J.F. Powers.*

I suppose a writer going to church has more than an average interest in the sermon. In America it is a somewhat Protestant interest, perhaps. Certainly it can be a source of much woe. I myself have suffered all my adult life from something I can only describe as My Sunday Sickness. This is what comes from listening intently during the sermon. Sleepers and the indifferent Awake are never afflicted, and that they are dead or indifferent to the preacher is no test of their faith: It could be a testament to their wisdom, but very likely they are there, as they should be, for the Mass, and in that circumstance is one of the differences between Catholic and Protestant, and also the reason our sermons on the whole are no better than they need to be.

And still there must exist many misapprehensions about the sermon in high places. Regularly we of the congregation are exposed to a series of sermons dealing with the sacraments, say, in which they are served up cold, defined, with little or no interpretation, as though definitions were elements in physics and if you got the right ones in you'd get the right result, that is, the truth comprehended....Our Lord, however, did not teach by abstractions. He knew that something different—I would say more—was necessary.

Great sermons require great congregations; at least they do to go over....The conclusion often drawn from this proposition only seems to be true, that is, mediocre congregations require mediocre sermons, although this might explain why so many whose talents must certainly lie elsewhere see it their duty to become preachers, as if fulfilling a law of supply and demand. Who hasn't suffered the pedant trying to be a regular fellow? And the regular fellow—with a real feeling for baseball, say—trying to be dark and tragic?

But the worst is that so many excellent men talk down to congregations all their life, always with the hope of reaching great numbers at a level that language, theirs at least, just won't reach without perverting its purpose—assuming that souls are to be found there actually; there is no evidence that they are, from the sermons of Jesus. J.F. POWERS

Susanne Washburn

CLEARING THE MINES

Lethal excavations in Vietnam

The campaign against land mines, the work of many activists and diplomats, led to the 1997 Ottawa Treaty in which nations around the world—now numbering 135—agreed to ban the use, sale, and export of antipersonnel land mines. For signatories, the treaty took effect March 1, 1999. The United States remains an outsider. At Ottawa, it had unsuccessfully sought exemptions to the ban for a few hot spots like Korea, where 30,000 members of the American military are stationed. Without defensive land mines, the Pentagon maintains, such troops would be at unacceptable risk.

Apart from ending the new deployment of land mines, the removal of mines and other munitions already in place is universally acknowledged to be the most urgent task associated with this worldwide scourge. Each year exploding land mines cause the death or mutilation of more than 25,000 victims, primarily in underdeveloped countries, among which Vietnam and Cambodia rank as the most treacherous.

One small organization, based in Bainbridge Island, Washington, was the first to spearhead a response to the pressing need in Vietnam. Created as soon as the United States reestablished diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1995, PeaceTrees Vietnam (PTVN) has a three-pronged program to deal with the leftover weapons that dot Quang Tri, the northernmost province of the former South Vietnam. The province includes a broad swath of land that was the DMZ (demilitarized zone) of the Vietnam War. Today Quang Tri harbors an estimated 58,000 land mines, although it is not even half the size of New Hampshire. Recently two other demining organizations—one German, one British—have joined PTVN in Vietnam. All three will concentrate on Quang Tri Province.

PTVN has so far sponsored ten trips to Vietnam. Early on, volunteer American experts trained Vietnamese deminers in the use of state-of-the-art equipment and UN safety regulations. The initial PTVN project cleared an eighteen-acre site; subsequently, PTVN volunteers—Americans, Vietnamese, and other nationals—planted 1,700 saplings there,