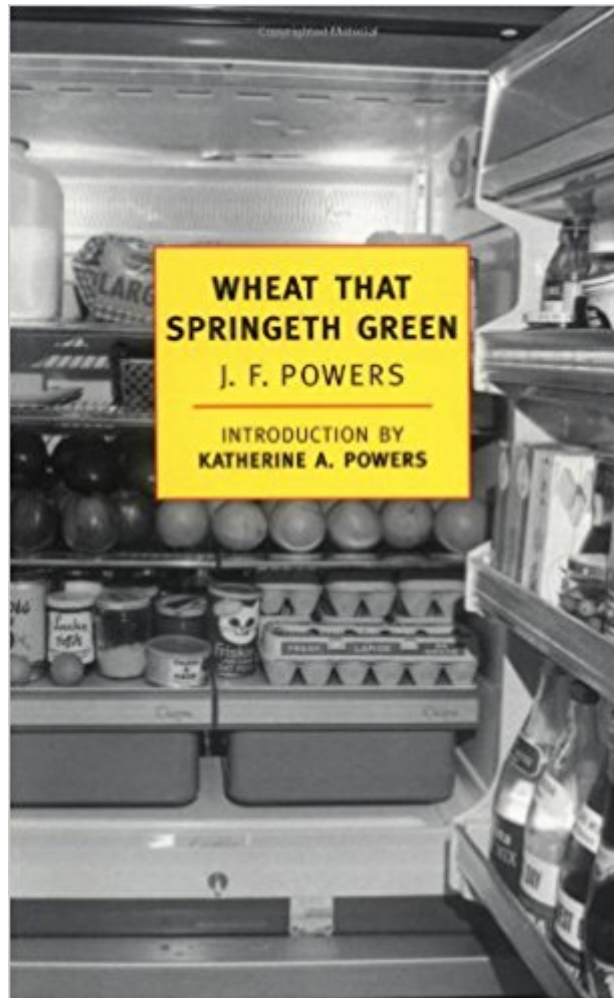


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Wheat That Springeth Green (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

Wheat That Springeth Green, J. F. Powers's beautifully realized final work, is a comic foray into the commercialized wilderness of modern American life. Its hero, Joe Hackett, is a high school track star who sets out to be a saint. But seminary life and priestly apprenticeship soon damp his ardor, and by the time he has been given a parish of his own he has traded in his hair shirt for the consolations of baseball and beer. Meanwhile Joe's higher-ups are pressing for an increase in profits from the collection plate, suburban Inglenook's biggest business wants to launch its new line of missiles with a blessing, and not all that far away, in Vietnam, a war is going on. Joe wants to duck and cover, but in the end, almost in spite of himself, he is condemned to do something right. J. F. Powers was a virtuoso of the American language with a perfect ear for the telling cliché and an unfailing eye for the kitsch that clutters up our lives. This funny and very moving novel about the making and remaking of a priest is one of his finest achievements.

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Customer Reviews

During his famous journey through America in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville was struck by the peculiar worldliness of religious practice. Unlike their European counterparts, who specialized in visions of heaven, "American preachers are constantly referring to the earth, and it is only with great difficulty that they can divert their attention from it." More than a century later, J.F. Powers built an entire career on this national tendency. And nowhere did he capture the sacred-and-profane

balancing act with more amusement than in his 1975 novel, *Wheat That Springeth Green*. His protagonist, a Great Depression-era child of the Midwest named Joe Hackett, has early dreams of joining the priesthood: If he decided to be a priest in a religious order, though, he could live out in the country, at a college, and have invigorating walks and talks with students ... and maybe some exciting adventures, and also do good, as often happened in the Father Finn books ("My God!" cried the atheist") that Sister Agatha read to the class at the end of the day. Joe eventually attends seminary, is ordained, and finds himself appointed as assistant to a high-octane contemplative, Father Van Slaag. But by the time he gets his own parish, in 1968, he's become an expert at relegating sanctity to the back burner. Overweight, agreeably resigned, Joe accepts the fact that "running a parish, any parish, was like riding a cattle car in the wintertime--you could appreciate the warmth of your dear, dumb friends, but you never knew when you'd be stepped on, or worse." It takes the arrival of a young, over-earnest curate to jog his idealism back to life. And in return, he imparts to the younger man his knowledge of the "worldly" priesthood--a craft that Powers, no less than de Tocqueville, refuses to condemn. This exchange, which is gradual and grudging on both sides, occupies the greater portion of *Wheat That Springeth Green*. And the protagonist's regeneration, like that alluded to in the title, seems no less miraculous for being expected. The result is a marvelous, acute novel, which gives to Joe's spiritual rebirth the shape of a classic American comedy--trials and tribulations, and finally, a happy ending. --James Marcus

Joe Hackett is a 44-year-old priest living in the Midwest in 1968. Once, when he was young and training for the priesthood, he was fanatical; he wore a hair shirt and gave up his vices: "smokes, sweets, snacks, snooker, and handball." Now he is middle-aged, comfortable and rather complacent, a bit of a Babbitt. He drinks too much, is overweight and over-concerned with appearances. He goes through the motions with his middle-class parish. Friction arises when a new assistant arrives. Just out of seminary, Bill has in Joe's jaded eyes certain naive ideas. It's a gentlemanly conflict: the men like each other, and, as Joe cultivates their "priestly fellowship," through the upheavals of surreptitious parish fund-raising, a quiet evening drink or afternoon ball playing, he recognizes in his assistant his own idealistic, younger self. As a result of this introspection, and of the bureaucratic necessities that the structure of the church imposes, Joe changes from the middle-management timeserver he is surprised to realize he has become, to a less secular, more spiritual person. In his first novel in 25 years, since the National Book Award-winning *Morte D'Urban*, Powers writes in a casual, yet supple style. Brilliantly using details to illuminate both character and scene, and exhibiting an unerring ear for dialogue, reduced to its

essentials, strikingly lifelike, often riotously funny, Powers succeeds in conveying the nuts and bolts of a clergyman's life even as he illuminates the hidden corners of his soul. Copyright 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This book accurately captures the intersection between American faith and American life as well as anything I've read since Edwin O'Connor's "Edge of Sadness." Powers writes with a realism that makes all aspects of a parish world come alive. (In particular, I like how he advised the young man seeking guidance about whether to participate in the Vietnam War). What impressed me most about the novel is the way in which Powers crafts sentences in such a simple, but stylized manner. What I initially took for disorganization is actually a type of organization that only illuminates a priest's daily existence.

I've been a fan of the late J F Powers for probably thirty years. Have read his classic novel of the Church in the 1950s, *Morte D'Urban* (New York Review Books Classics), at least 2-3 times. And also read his three books of stories. Can't figure out how I missed this one, *WHEAT THAT SPRINGETH GREEN*, his only other novel, first published 25 years ago. In any case, I am most grateful to NYRB Classics imprint for reissuing all of Powers' work again. He was a writer much respected by other writers, but often neglected and underappreciated by the general reading public, probably because of his never-changing, constant subjects: the priesthood and the Catholic Church. This novel is perhaps even better than *Morte D'Urban*, set in a midwest diocese at the height of the Vietnam war. Father Joe Hackett is a character that will stay with you for a long time, probably because of his very human faults, his utter 'humanity.' You will laugh and wince in recognition, not just at Hackett, but also at some of the other buffoonish priests and prelates depicted here, like Cooney, Mooney and Rooney. Or at the nicknames given: Shorty and Slug, Catfish, Arch (the Archbishop) and others. It is eye-opening and often a bit sad to watch Joe's gradual transformation as this tale of the modern Church spins out and winds down. A favorite line, indicating Joe's final loss of innocence - "... believing as he did that the separation of of Church and Dreck was a matter of life and death for the world, that the Church was the one force in the world with a chance to save it ..." There is a kind of redemption for Joe, however, as, in the end, he takes up his "cross." I love this book and hope to find time to read it again some day. But then, "so many books ..." Highly recommended.- Tim Bazzett, author of the memoir, *BOOKLOVER*

Having read Powers' other book, *Morte D'Urban*, I was hoping for the best, but alas this book simply

does not have the depth or the diversity of characters and their interactions. No real surprises either in the plot. Entire book is centered on one character, a somewhat reluctant priest, and his travails of everyday doings, comings and goings. Yes, there is humor in there but it's just not that riotous or spirited.

Wheat took Powers some 25 years to produce, the life of a parish priest in all its vexing details, circa the mid 1960's, suburban USA, told with wit and grace, and remarkable polish. You wonder about relevance the innocence of the American Catholic Church of the sixties as Powers describes it, in the time before the great sex scandals, the cover up. Powers's ability to tell a story is just in a class of its own.

Brilliant, moving ...

Good book. Good story. Some of the dialogue gets a bit clunky. Over a good characters.

No need to summarize the plot; others have already done so. This is another terrific novel by the author of "Morte D'Urban" and fans of that sadly-neglected work will find this one equally enjoyable. Powers has a talent, rare in American literature, for subtlety. His portrayal of Joe Hackett, a somewhat aloof, well-meaning but complacent Catholic priest, is a masterpiece of nuance, as realistic a character study as any I've encountered. One wouldn't think a book about the everyday goings-on of a suburban clergyman (everything from fund-raising to attending retreats to petty diocesan politicking) would hold much interest for the lay-reader, but don't let the subject matter scare you: this is a book about faith, redemption, and the wins and losses faced by all of us as we grow older (and, purportedly, wiser). J.F. Powers's characters are built incrementally, as much through what they say and do as by what they leave unsaid and undone. The dialog here is snappy, the plotting is swift, the humor is wonderfully dry (the first chapter alone is a quiet riot), the observations of human nature are acute. The writing is razor-sharp; not a wasted word or imprecise thought to be found. And this without the stylistic bells and whistles so many writers feel the need to employ in order to "prove" their literary merit. It's not often I say that I hated to see a book come to an end, but in this case, it was true. In many ways, the novel ends just as Hackett's life is beginning. Keep Powers in print. Read this book.

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