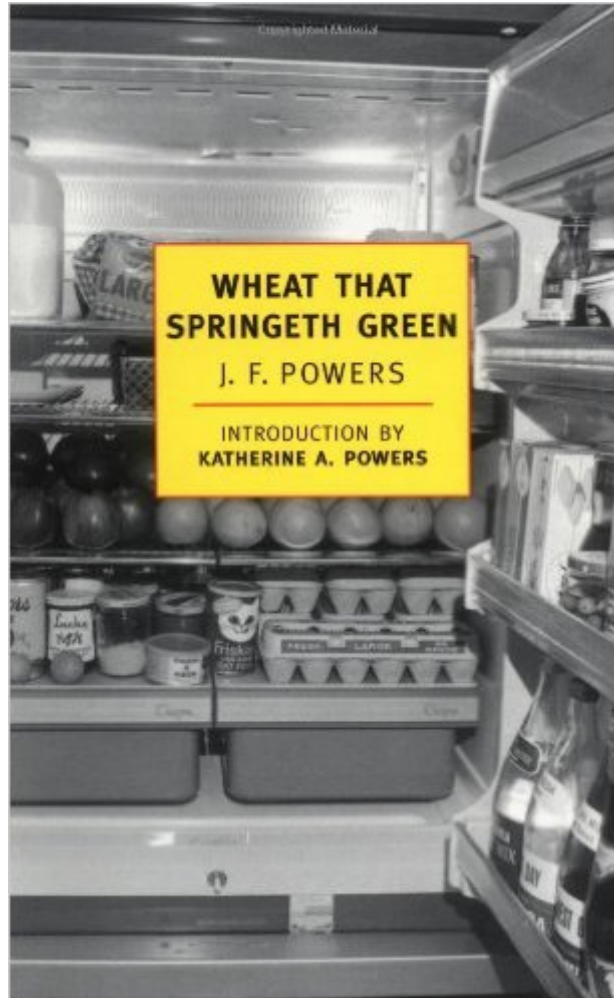


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Wheat That Springeth Green (New York Review Books Classics)



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 unflinching 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The best of the series of books published by The New York Review of Books are all the works of J.F. Powers, who died in 1989. Powers' novels and stories are almost entirely concerned with Catholic clerical life in the midwest. I hadn't read his last novel, *Wheat That Springeth Green*, and I was happy to find that the new edition contained an introduction by the author's daughter, Katherine Powers. *Wheat That Springeth Green* is every bit as fine as *Morte D'Urban*, his first and only other

novel written some 25 years earlier, and a National Book Award winner as well. In its treatment of character and plot the latter novel is theologically perhaps even more complex. Joe's character is cast from the first pages: as a toddler he gets attention from his parents' friends merely for declaiming at a party "I go to church!" We also learn of his parents' antipathy towards the parish priest's intoning on the subject of the "Dollar-a-Sunday Club," an attitude that Joe will inherit, and which becomes a theme that will be played out in a number of surprising ways. We also sense something of his aloofness in these first chapters as well. He doesn't keep up with many friends, but he does seem to know the value in keeping up appearances: "Joe just smiled at Frances and everybody, so they couldn't tell how he really felt about being in the sack race..." Joe is a good athlete, even in grade school, and the race he really wants, but doesn't get, is the sprint. Much of the story revolves around Joe's relation to money, so that even an early adventure (described in nearly pornographic detail) involving his first adult relations with women is later understood to be subsumed by his larger pecuniary obsessions.

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