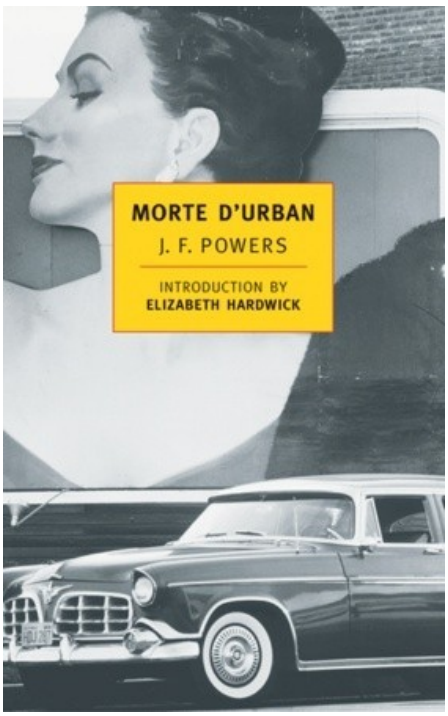

Morte D'Urban

J.F. Powers , Elizabeth Hardwick (Introduction)

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Winner of The 1963 National Book Award for Fiction.

The hero of J.F. Powers's comic masterpiece is Father Urban, a man of the cloth who is also a man of the world. Charming, with an expansive vision of the spiritual life and a high tolerance for moral ambiguity, Urban enjoys a national reputation as a speaker on the religious circuit and has big plans for the future. But then the provincial head of his dowdy religious order banishes him to a retreat house in the Minnesota hinterlands. Father Urban soon bounces back, carrying God's word with undaunted enthusiasm through the golf courses, fishing lodges, and backyard barbecues of his new turf. Yet even as he triumphs his tribulations mount, and in the end his greatest success proves a setback from which he cannot recover.

First published in 1962, *Morte D'Urban* has been praised by writers as various as Gore Vidal, William Gass, Mary Gordon, and Philip Roth. This beautifully observed, often hilarious tale of a most unlikely Knight of Faith is among the finest achievements of an author whose singular vision assures him a permanent place in American literature.

Morte D'Urban Details

Date	:	Published May 31st 2000 by NYRB Classics (first published 1962)
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Author	:	J.F. Powers , Elizabeth Hardwick (Introduction)
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From Reader Review Morte D'Urban for online ebook

David says

If you were brought up Catholic like me [1], you know that—even though you may turn your back on all of it when you finally come to your senses—a lot of it stays with you. And I'm not talking about the beliefs. Those are pure Medievalism, easily dismissible. What I'm talking about is the basic underlying structure of ritualized guilt and repression. You know, the fun stuff. But no matter how much I try to scrub my psyche clean, to expunge the last stubborn residue of Catholicism, I will always to some extent identify myself as Catholic. I'll be honest here. Protestantism is mostly disturbing to me. It's too prosaic, rustic, folksy. Its churches often resemble either barns or airports. The militancy of its more (ahem) passionate adherents (i.e., 'religious nuts') puts most Catholics—often content with passivity and indifference—in the pale. I appreciate the general passionlessness of most Catholics. In my experience, many Catholics understand that religion is just a habit, a custom—something that you do until you don't do it anymore. They are mostly uninterested in shouting out praise to Jesus Christ or embarking upon an undignified religious rapture like some of their Christian peers.

It's funny that the very things that many Protestant sects rebelled against in Catholicism are the very key to its limited appeal (for me): the gothic icons, the melancholia, the cannabilism, and the veneration of the Virgin Mary, just to name a few. Let's face it. Jesus Christ could be either an airy hippie or a lousy humbug at times, and the Virgin Mary is much more endearing. I'd rather talk to her in my prayers any day, and as a child I certainly did. She was the indulgent mother counterposed with the dyspeptic, authoritarian God the Father. We were a 1950s nuclear family—God, Mary, and me—and you can be sure that it was Mary—mild, nurturing Mary, stepping on that fucking serpent—to whom I appealed when I was in trouble.

Now to the point of these ramblings. *Morte D'Urban* is a book I think I should have loved, and for a while I did, but it was too Catholic even for me. And I don't mean that it shoves Catholic doctrine down your throat or anything—not at all. I mean that it is so riddled with the bureaucratic trappings of Catholicism that it occasionally left me bored or even confused [2].

Now I realize the novel's intention was in fact to illuminate the ways in which the Catholic Church resembles an often inefficient private corporation... mirroring its personal and departmental rivalries, thorny hierarchies, and employee apathy. But sometimes I think J.F. Powers went overboard. A great author does not have to *be* dull to illustrate dullness. Powers shows he is up to the task at times, as when the protagonist Father Urban (a liberal, charismatic, and motivated priest of the Clementine order) is shuffled off to a rural Minnesota outpost—no doubt a political maneuver by the Father Provincial, who fears Father Urban's popularity. Urban's exchanges with Father Wilfrid, a puttering doofus who runs the Minnesota retreat, are comedy gold. Wilfrid is seemingly only concerned with the maintenance and refurbishment of the retreat house, and as such he enlists Urban in many idiotic do-it-yourself projects. Wilfrid is also preposterously cheap, reluctant even to heat much of the building during the frigid Minnesota winters. I loved the time the novel spent insightfully (and comically) observing these characters at the retreat house.

At other times, I didn't love *Morte D'Urban* so much. I would say there's about a hundred page stretch in this 340 page book that just kind of drags, concerned as it is on expounding upon the tricky relationships at a nearby parish called St. Monica's and upon Urban's plan to found a golf course adjacent to the retreat center. Powers has a dry, oblique way with his humor that occasionally becomes grating. The narration is third person, but it clearly describes Urban's attitudes and impressions—resulting in a portrait of a slightly arrogant and condescending man. All in all, Urban's not entirely appealing. He's human, sure, but I don't

know that he's the best counterposition to the bureaucratic inefficiency and complacency of the Catholic Church. I don't take exception to Urban's self-satisfaction as much as I bristle at his psychological dullness. Sure, next to Father Wilfrid and his ilk, Urban appears lively and colorful, but transposed to St. Monica's and the golf course, he's just another guy. A golfing priest, a Catholic salesman. So what?

[1] When I say 'brought up Catholic' I mean that I went to Catholic grade school, Catholic high school, and a few years of Catholic college. I *do not* mean that I came from a religious family, however. My parents were indifferent Catholics. We rarely went to Church, and God and religion were never discussed around the house.

[2] I'm not really sure of the distinctions (if there are any) between a monsigneur, a rector, and a priest. Nor do I fully grasp the subtle rivalries between the religious orders. Powers approaches the Catholic bureaucracy as if his audience fully understands its intricacies. Even as a Catholic, I did not.

Jim Booth says

Catholicism is darkly comic in J.F. Powers's Morte D'Urban - would that it were more comic, less dark, in the real world...

See the full review at www.newsoutherngentleman.wordpress.com - link available on my Goodreads page. Thanks for stopping by!

Tony says

This 1963 National Book Award winner is about a group of Catholic Priests. An Order of Clementines? Yes, thank you, Marcel. And if you read it at one level, it is about the politics of groups. Power and pettiness. Ability and purpose. I wondered if a similar book could be written about Tibetan monks.

At another level, this book is a character study, in particular of Father Urban. Urban is smooth. Smooooth. Great preacher, and much in demand for that. But he also is great at finding where the money is and turning the rich into benefactors. And while he wants to be 'promoted' he nevertheless is too purposeful to let it show. Instead he follows the maxim that much can be accomplished if it doesn't matter who gets the credit.*

A married woman (soon to be naked except for a pair of high heels), alone with Urban in a lighthouse with a bottle of Scotch, calls him an 'operator' and says he doesn't have a friend in the world. He disputes only the latter charge, but, thinking about it, can't name one.

But it's a defining moment. Because just when you think he's one thing - a Catholic Elmer Gantry perhaps - he becomes another.

We hear often about how writers should show, not tell. And that's fine advice, until you trip over your style

book. I thought this book was a perfect example of showing, not telling. Remarkable.

--------- And now, unannounced, and without advertising sponsor, here is your Yantush Passingass Moment of Clarity (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jx4Ev...

(view spoiler)

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*There are dozens of people credited with this maxim, including Emerson and Reagan, but the earliest attribution I can find is to a Jesuit priest named Father Strickland, circa 1863. If that matters.

**I'm KIDDDDDIIIIIINNNNGGGGGGG!

Ben says

slowly and quietly builds to a devastating ending. diary of a minnesotan priest.

Justin Evans says

It took me a while to get into Powers' short stories, but after I finished the first volume of them I couldn't put them down. So I was primed for this, and it didn't disappoint. In fact, the larger canvas seems to suit him more in some ways. Granted, it suffers a little bit from the same kind of disjointed narrative track that Cheever Wapshot Chronicle suffers from, but to nowhere near the same degree. But that's this novel's only flaw (unless you count 'being about a priest' as a flaw, which I don't, but some might): it's beautifully written, quietly hilarious in an Evelyn Waugh kind of way, and extraordinarily subtle in its depiction of the unbridgeable gap between the best and worst aspects of modern human beings. Powers has an incredible ability to vary the distance between the narrative voice and main character (sometimes they're practically identical, sometimes much fun is had at Urban's expense), and to elicit both ironic scorn & joyful admiration for all of the characters, all in perfectly clear prose. My only complaint (occasional disjointed narrative aside) is that he only wrote two novels.

Valarie says

If you want to take this novel literally and say it is a book about the adventures of an ambitious priest (not unlike a Catholic Elmer Gantry of sorts) who was exiled to the middle of nowhere, be my guest, but it doesn't take long before you realize there is something else going on here and it begins to dawn on you that is all sounds ... remotely ... like your job!

Congratulations, my friend, you've reached the AHA moment.

It's a difficult book to find (I think it's out of print but your library may have a copy), but if you feel a little frustrated about your current job, it's worth picking up. You'll even get a good laugh or two out of it.

Kurt says

The book to show the world what a sentimental sap Garrison Keiller really is. Morte D'Urban, won the National Book Award in 1961, is set, as is Lake Woebegone, in Sterns County, Minnesota. Both use Holdingford, a small farm town where my grandfather owned the hardware store, and its inhabitants as fodder for their fictions.
Powers has one of the best ears in vernacular fiction, sufficiently so for Evelyn Waugh to cite him as his favorite American writer. He may be mine, given my familiarity with his vernacular gives him an unfair advantage over the pack contending for my favor. His characters are my family, even more so in The Wheat That Springeth Green, which might be a biography of my father save for his becoming a suicide instead of a priest.
After the tragedy, I reread Powers and it was a great consolation.

Keiller makes minstrelsy out of the same material.

Spike Gomes says

J.F. Powers is less obscure than the previous long out of print author I reviewed, but nonetheless, unless

someone was really into either Midwestern literature or American Catholic writers, you'd probably never know him, despite the fact this novel won the American Book Award back in 1963 and his fans included such great writers as Evelyn Waugh and Flannery O'Connor. He wasn't prolific, having a perfectionist streak and a contrarian personality. His two novels and much of his short fiction dwells on the lives of Catholic priests, mostly on the worldly aspects of the politics and the economic nuts and bolts of working with a large somewhat dysfunctional bureaucracy and dealing with parishioners, whom one must serve as spiritual adviser... even if they're nasty people you'd rather not spend time with if they weren't huge financial patrons. The spiritual message of this particular novel is buried underneath all the secular aspects, I actually had to read the last two chapters and epilogue over again to really get at the nut of what was a crisis of faith and it's resolution that is never spoken of directly, and instead is presented as an outward tragedy.

Set in the time when American Catholicism had come into it's own, between its practical origin as a religion of ethnic immigrants and their descendants, and its current social irrelevance despite remaining the largest Christian denomination in the nation, the novel is about a Catholic Church that I only saw remnants of growing up, in the elderly but often sophisticated and intelligent priests. Those Fathers are almost all gone now, and the institutions they served and operated are run-down, sclerotic and often half-empty. The 1940s-1960s were the golden age of the Church, when it was an American institution. This novel is a sardonic look at that institution, but while it casts a jaundiced eye on it, it's not so much criticizing it, as recognizing that it is composed of humans, who are far from perfect.

Father Urban Roche is an effective and charismatic priest in a rather small and undistinguished religious order. His popularity, administrative skill and most importantly, his barely concealed aspirations towards leadership makes him a target for the regional head of the order, who de facto exiles him to a decrepit retreat house in the countryside of Minnesota, where his father superior is a thick, stubborn cheapskate. Much of the humor is derived from the refined and “urban” Father Urban dealing with the realities of rural life in Minnesota. With finesse and hard-work, Urban applies his skills in cultivating rich patrons, winning over parishes with guest sermons and making business deals in order to recreate the successful life he had in Chicago. He succeeds in all his aspirations regarding this world, but at the cost of his physical and spiritual health, and realizes that in certain respects, he failed to make true bonds of the spirit with his peers in the order and the people he shepherded.

Powers does a great job in creating characters who are flawed, but likeable. Father Urban is vain, fond of worldly comforts like cigars, sports cars and good whisky, and often more concerned about the loss of face giving into his temptation for women would entail rather than the spiritual damage. That said, he is devoted to his job, loyal to his vows and respects and obeys his superiors, even if he thinks they're idiotic or petty. What he does is for the greater glory of his order, his church and his God, even if he bends the rules on the vows of poverty and bites his tongue when a patron acts very badly.

Like a lot of other reviewers here have noticed, it sounds like one of those “Rise and Fall of a Businessman” tropes so popular in the 20th Century. It really is. It deals with the church as an institution that exists in this world and thus needs to find ways to pay the bills. It's workers have to deal with annoying coworkers and customers just as much as the rest of us do at work. That said, I do find a deeper spiritual message underneath all that and what people here are calling the “downer” ending.

Yes, for all intents and purposes, Urban ends the novel as a broken man who no longer has the will, energy and ability to be an “operator”. His laurels are hollow, and he is in pain, lonely and miserable. But if you think that he has lost everything, read the final chapter and epilogue again carefully. Think back to earlier in the book and read between the lines of what goes on. Urban has earned a spiritual redemption that he doesn't even realize since he never had the eyes for it. Granted, it's probably hard for those not really steeped in the

historical and thematic mores of Apostolic Christianity to really suss out, but it's there.

The book isn't perfect. It shows it's age in it's dialogue and details, which might make it a bit hard for those who don't really know Catholicism or mid-20th century Midwestern America all that well. It's also a bit overpolished. You can see the meticulous outlining the author did in regards to thematic arcs because he honed the descriptive language and plot situations so starkly, it stands out a bit much and tends to drag rather than move the plot along, hence me reading the ending too quickly the first time around. I got too used to scanning parts.

Still, this is a must read for anyone who likes Catholic novels. Much like O'Connor's Southern Gothic and Waugh's British aristocrat mien, this novel delivers the church's message with a soft-spoken, dry, midwestern reserve.

4.5 out of 5 stars.

Willa says

I got this book from Paperback Swap after reading about JF Powers in a book called The Catholic Writer. This was one of only two novels he wrote -- he was mostly known as a writer of short stories. For more about him, you can read here http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquar... and here http://magazine.nd.edu/news/17697-men....

Morte D'Urban tells the story of Harvey Roche, who becomes Father Urban of the fictional Clementine order, a sort of discount version of the Jesuits without even a striking habit to distinguish them. The supposed St Clement was martyred by a millstone, and it seems that this is often a danger that also faces the Church of the 50's as it tries to steer the balance between faith and success. Father Urban, a talented speaker with a good opinion of himself, is basically exiled to a rundown station in rural Minnesota and the story concerns his attempts to make a place for himself there. There is golf, beer, and nice cars involved, but there are also clerical politics and strange rural business deals, and old paint thinned with turpentine until it is streaky, and red squirrels rolling acorns in the walls. Though Father Urban is not exactly a noble figure, you can't help sympathizing with him in his sophisticated cluelessness.

The style reminded me very much of Evelyn Waugh, especially in his earlier books, except with a sort of uniquely midwestern-American flatness. I was also reminded of Babbitt, especially in the descriptions of the characters around the priest.

There is a subplot where one of the priests Father Urban works with is writing a retelling of Morte D'Arthur. In light of the title of the book, it seems significant that there is quite a discussion of Lancelot and his illicit love for Guinevere and a discussion of whether or not they were indeed caught in "high treason". This seems to be an echo of one of the main themes of the book -- how far an American Catholic cleric can go in becoming entwined with worldly things without compromising the integrity of his vocation. Is Father Urban guilty of "high treason" with worldly power? Once he becomes aware of this, what can he do as a result? Does Father Urban of the Clementines in some way represent the City of God as it tries to be "in the world but not of it?" To raise these questions while being consistently wryly amusing is not a small feat for a first novel.

If you were tempted to think of the Church before the 60's as unaffected by secular pressures, this book

would undeceive you. In many respects you can see the Church of nowadays in this Church of half a century ago, though perhaps without the folksy guitar masses.

I'm glad to have gotten acquainted with another Catholic writer who can join Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy on my bookshelf. Powers reminds me more of Percy than of O'Connor, but I like Morte D'Urban better than I liked The Moviegoer. It avoids the least hint of sentimentality while still managing to be sympathetic.

P says

Morte d'Urban is a Catholic novel by a Catholic author, but it's also a singularly American novel. It's about going to work. Think inept colleagues, vindictive superiors, fruitless and boring busywork. Our protagonist Father Urban – successful, charming, handsome – is a traveling salesman out of Chicago for the fictional Order of St. Clement. He enjoys a cigar and stiff drink, sports cars, "the right sort of people", golf. Critics often compare him to Babbitt, but that's not right: he's a dynamic, solicitous priest. He simply wants his failing order to recover from centuries of poor management.

The Clementines' history revealed little to brag about – one saint (the Holy Founder) and a few bishops of missionary sees, no theologians worthy of the name, no original thinkers, not even a scientist. The Clementines were unique in that they were noted for nothing at all. They were in bad shape all over the world.

Father Urban is one of few men in the Order capable of turning things around. So of course his boss views him as a rival and ships him off to a would-be retreat house in nowhersesville Minnesota. Enter the bumbling crew of the house, led by clueless Father Wilf. This first part of the book is funny, like laugh-out-loud Wooster and Jeeves levels of hilarity. The tone subtly and gradually shifts until by the end Urban's greatest triumph precipitates his most regrettable loss: himself.

NYRB should be commended for republishing Powers, always a critical and literary darling but one who struggled to find readers. It's a shame, because he managed to capture not just a clerical idiom but a uniquely American one.

Jason says

For a writer whose many stories and two novels focus to the exclusion of most all else on the lives of priests, J. F. Powers writes steady prose of sufficient sober heft as to keep his rendered worlds (not the least bit unfamiliar worlds) squarely grounded on terra firma. These are hardly works that delve into the inner life of the spiritual supplicant. Interiority is their field only in a limited sense, and the interior here faithfully reflects the exterior (the world of people, things, and their relations). They deal w/ the workaday, the earthly, the prosaic (often in wonderful comic complexity). They also make up a body of work which to me constitutes that of an unassailable master. At the end of the day, according to this humble commentator, Catholic and wry Powers is handily one of the finest writers of fiction America ever produced, his subject more than anything else the plodding hilarities of daily life, speaking though they do to a million little defeats and small deaths (by ever so many pricks). I have taken a long time getting around to this, his debut novel. I very much

do not have any sound reason of which I am aware for having so long postponed access to its many delights and deep riches. When I many years ago read his second novel, WHEAT THAT SPRINGETH GREEN, I was floored by it. It has since lodged itself in my personal pantheon as one of the greatest American novels. I loved so much its protagonist's transformation from resolutely pious church upstart (w/ a proclivity for overusing his hair shirt) to a lax and disaffected borderline-alcoholic overseeing a gaggle of frustrating parishioners within the fraught political contexts that inform his work and times. In many ways this was a book about how becoming an ethical adult means allowing for an increasing degree of moral laxity, though such an awakening is never entirely free of peril and potential pitfall. Already in MORTE D'URBAN, it now turns out, Powers had rendered a priest admirably worldly and canny about the foibles of common folk, never one to judge nor decry when svelter maneuvers are called for (though susceptible to the aforementioned pitfalls). Though Father Urban has nominally given himself over to priesthood and to spiritual teaching, he is a man very much of the world and one who operates there. We must not forget that churches are not only places where souls are healed, they are also social institutions (commercial concerns, even, as blurber Pete Hamill avers), and are thus tied up in the dynamics of the worlds they inhabit (often petty and venial). It is because of this the Powers's novels (and stories) are above all social comedies more concerned w/ specificities of time and place - how the human project becomes expressed or compressed in them - then they are about universal spiritual matters. Powers's works are so extraordinarily well-observed and so very funny, so very American, precisely because their author has such an uncommon grasp of his countrymen and their hang-ups. Just on a totally personal level, I hold Powers to be one of the very great American writers, and MORTE D'URABAN is predictably a total triumph. I would like to end this by warning prospective readers that Elizabeth Hardwick's introduction to the New York Review Books edition spoils more pertinent plot points than should be strictly necessary.

Eileen says

It's a little difficult to get into a book following a brother of the order of St. Clement through dioscesan politics and secular fundraising in the midwest of the late 50s/early 60s. For one thing, the tone of the book, especially the dialogue, really makes me picture every character both looking and sounding like Harry Truman. Give Harry Truman a Roman collar, put him in the passenger seat of a huge bucketous Cadillac, and we can call it a day.

For another, the church depicted here doesn't really exist any more. As an entirely secular person, I can't imagine a roomful of people being inspired by a rousing spiritual speech. The idea of Catholic fundraising is extremely strange, especially as here it really focuses on social relations with individuals.

Yet I still found this a very well done and thought-provoking book. The characterization of the main character, Father Urban, is convincing, even if his midcentury verbal mannerisms ring in my ears. "Say!" "Not a-tall, not a-tall." The thing is, the mannerisms are flawless. It's hard to believe that priests or Chicago were ever like this, but in the present, Chicago and priests retain some vestige of these descriptions. There's a sense of bluster, overlaid with ad-era charm, that is totally convincing.

Synopsis: Father Urban is one of the stars of his order, constantly traveling around the midwest to make speeches, build relationships, and eventually take donations from anyone who wants to tithe. When he is transferred from Chicago to a tiny chapter house in Minnesota, he is surprised and nonplussed. However, as an energetic and outgoing priest, he continues his work, and for a while it seems that all will be well. But as he transforms his new home, it becomes clear that the very people who financially support the church are

spiritually poorer than he ever knew.

Ben Loory says

whoever it was who put the huge b&w early-60s italian-glamour photo of the beautiful woman on the cover of this book was a genius, and i want to thank him for doing it, because otherwise i would never have picked it up, much less read it. seeing how it's yet another very quiet (and quietly funny) realistic portrait of an isolated priest in the midwest. not the usual vein i mine.

i'm not really sure how powers does it. but Wheat That Springeth Green is now firmly in my top 15-20 favorite books of all time. and who knows where this one will end up. the books are so quiet, so non-dramatic... so measured... so lacking in conflict, or at least passionate struggle... i feel like maybe i understand being catholic-- or religious at all-- after reading these books. or at least, somewhat better. not because they engage or discuss theological matters... there's no graham greene-style angst here, no fear for one's soul, as the main character's already completely accepted his path, and never once veers from the course... but because they communicate what i can see now might be the *experience* of being a true believer and priest. these books are funny in that they are gently satirical. satirical of the world as a whole. but never in a mean-spirited way. in a way that comes from seeing this world as a temporary waystation, a kind of cosmic experiment or proving ground. everything is serious, and you try to do what you can, but on the other hand, all you can do is the best you can. it's a crazy place, and people are crazy, and we just all need to make the best of it. it's all kinda funny, and all kinda sad, but there's a god in heaven, and eternal life, so you take the hits and move on and try not to complain.

i am probably not expressing it very well, but there really is something one-of-a-kind about the way powers sees and writes. the closest thing i can compare him to would be p.g. wodehouse, if you slowed him way down and then tried to make him act like everything was Very Important. that kind of clarity of vision and drama, that kind of appreciation for language and detail, and, really, that kind of humor, just minus the madcap pace and irreverence.

well, anyway, i give up. i am sad that he only wrote two novels. luckily there are still all The Stories of J.F. Powers to go.

Sheri says

So this whole book is about the secular and political concerns of the Order of Clementine. I was not actually aware of the hierarchy (yeah, I knew there were bishops and archbishops, etc) and the political relationships between the orders.

Urban is a great anti-hero. In the beginning we are led to believe that he is so charismatic and charming that he is capable of converting all he encounters and (more importantly) convincing them to make lots of donations. Certainly, through the course of the novel we see Urban succeed, but ultimately he can only succeed while he is not in power. As soon as he is responsible (or feels responsible), things start to fall apart;

he loses Billy, he is unsuccessful at rescuing Katie, he angers Sally (and Sylvia). Finally, at the height of his failure he is promoted to Provincial. The irony here is applaudable.

There were several great quips throughout:
"Londoners caught in the blitz--taxi drivers, young lovers, old drunks, old tea drinkers, nurses, surgeons, everybody--went right on with whatever they happened to be doing, and each time there was an explosion, they seemed to have the best of it, to have the last word, by saying nothing." and "He knew what he had to do--nothing. He had Wilf where he wanted him. As long as the situation remained unchanged, each passing moment would redound to one man's credit and to the other's shame." I love this sentiment. Frequently, I tell my children that I can't wait until the moment that one of them responds to the pestering of the other with "whatever" rather than getting upset and engaging in the fight.

I also loved "only great saints and little children lived each moment for all it was worth." because I am always striving to just enjoy each moment as it comes.

Overall it has a few funny moments and it was certainly enlightening because I didn't know a whole lot about the structure of the internal workings of the Catholic church.

Heather says

Morte D'Urban, like Catcher in the Rye, explores phonyness in post-war U.S. Compared to Salinger's classic, though, Morte D'Urban adopts a more adult if slightly more compromised view. Taking as its subject the business of operating the Catholic church, Morte D'Urban does a fantastically funny job describing the uncomfortable grooming of unsavory donors by the more worldly priests who understand the Church's need of them. Brilliantly, this book spells out the toll this mercenary relationship takes on the spiritual sincerity of the church's most dedicated servants.

Patrick says

This was supposed to be a very big deal - good reviews from New Yorker, etc., and it did have it moments. However, the main interest was some insight into the social and political life of catholic priests in the middle of the last century. Perhaps it was more shocking then. I did finish it, but that's about all I can say about it.

Laurie says

DNF
I went to the trouble of doing an interlibrary loan on this and really did try to finish reading it. After all it had won the 1963 National Book Award for fiction. I felt like I needed to read this, to justify the effort to procure it. But unfortunately that wasn't enough, I just didn't get it. Touted as humorous, I kept waiting. Not everyones cup of tea I guess.

Judy says

I had not heard of this author before. I read the novel because it won the National Book Award in 1963. This award was created in 1950 and I have read all the winning books from then up through 1963. Many were great; some challenged my idea of what I consider a great novel. *Morte D'Urban*, the third novel concerning priests from my 1963 list, was a stand out.

Father Urban is quite a character. I am a bit hazy on how he became a priest. It was well explained in the novel but I just don't remember it that clearly. In any case, it was a rash decision that left him conflicted for the rest of his life, but he did his best to perform the role despite the lowly status of the religious order to which he belonged.

His intelligence, his grasp of worldly matters and his genuine love of people are what got him through. One of his duties is fund raising which entails plenty of humorous moments. The author, who wrote only Catholic fiction, seems to have been unusually clear eyed regarding the challenges of living a dedicated religious life in our materialist culture.

Now that I think about it, this conflict between the world and the priest is almost always a theme in any religious fiction I have read so apparently it is a known issue.

Morte D'Urban has a sorrowful ending and I could see it coming as I read. A sign of good fiction for me is that I become deeply invested in the protagonist's plight. That happened for me in this smartly perceptive novel about the life of a priest in mid 20th century America.

It was the best of the three novels about priests in 1963, *The Shoes of the Fisherman* and *Grandmother and the Priests* being the other two.

I have now finished the Award Winners section of my 1963 list and am moving into the part of that list curated by me.

Here are the prize winners I read:

1. PULITZER: The Reivers, Faulkner
2. NEWBERY: A Wrinkle in Time, Madeleine L’Engle
3. CALDECOTT: The Snowy Day, Ezra Jack Keats
4. NBA: Morte D’Urban, J F Powers
5. HUGO: The Man in the High Castle, Philip K Dick-
6. EDGAR: Death and the Joyful Woman, Ellis Peters

Thomas says

Rather humorous and charming, but also a tad bit tedious.

Christopher says

It would be tough to imagine a more boring book. "Comic masterpiece?" I never even chortled. An unusual stinker in an interesting collection, this one proves that some books should stay forgotten.

None of the stories tend in any direction and the self-satisfaction of the bloated narrator, full with Sunday dinner and a nice brandy and cigar was a bit too much to take.

I'd take Graham Greene's exaggerated but real prose any day of the week over this lifeless, bland thing.

It was interesting seeing a Catholic priest be nothing more than a disgruntled employee. All the way until he started being good at his job. Then this turned into a handbook for the proper administration of a diocese. As an lover of the boring, this was instructive in seeing how much art is involved in making boredom lovely...through negative relief.
