

# THE BOOK OF JOTHAM



ARTHUR POWERS  
2012 TUSCANY PRIZE – NOVELLA

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# Preface

In 1979, while living in Brazil, I became deeply concerned about the mentally disabled and their role in God's plan. I had until then been very much the kind of person who overvalues his mind, considering my intelligence to be the center of my being. The presence of mentally disabled people challenged me, frightened me.

For several weeks, I brought this matter to prayer. Then one morning, as I prayed in Our Lady of Mercy Chapel in Rio de Janeiro, the story of Jotham was given to me.

Research and writing followed, but the story presented here is the story born that day in prayer.

THE BOOK OF  
JOTHAM

## LIGHT OR DARKNESS. Warmth or cold.

You know them. Feel them.

The fire in black night. The afternoon sun in winter. The hoe handle, hard and grained in your large palms, moving up and down in your father's field. Up and down. Up and down.

"Not just over there, boy. Move along."

Father's anger. Not dark or cold, but hurt like a wounded dog, snapping out with sharp teeth. Hurting you inside.

"Lord, how have I sinned to have such a son?"

"Shh, Judah. It's no sin . . ."

"Silence, Sarah."

"The boy loves us, Judah. He's from God."

Mother. Lightest light. Warmest warmth. When you are near her, you feel inside like the shade of grape leaves on a spring day. Cool water in the well. Small sparrows in the air.

Where she goes, you follow. She bakes bread at the fire and sings. You smile. She turns and smiles up at you, her brown eyes warm and soft.

Until one day she's gone.

"She's dead," your sister says. "She won't come back."

Adina's eyes glisten wet. You are sitting on a mat and she is

leaning over, in front of you, her face looking into yours. Her thin hands tighten hard on your shoulders. She shakes you.

“Do you understand?”

You move your head up and down, and she goes away. Up and down, goes your head, up and down. You feel dark and cold, so dark and cold, there will never be anything else. You stand up and look for your mother. She is not by the fire. You go outside. The fence, the field. “Ma . . . Mama!” you call. “Ma . . . Mama!”

She isn’t there. The sun is empty and cold. The wind is dark, so dark.

“Mama!”

“Stop it! Stop it!”

Adina screams in front of you. She looks up at you, angry like the hurt dog. Her thin hands stretch out. Her screams hurt you inside. Drops of water run down her cheeks from her hurting eyes.

Father is no longer angry. He is only very, very far away. Not dark, but gray like a rain sky. His cold is not winter cold, only cold like when the fire is dead. He sits at the table. Hunched over. You stand up and walk to him. You put your big hand on his shoulder.

“Ab . . . Ab . . . Abba.” The word is hard to say.

“Go away, boy.”

“Ab . . . Abba.”

Father stands up. He is angry. He looks at you, but then his



eyes are not angry any more. Only far away. He puts his hand on your shoulder. Then he turns and walks out the door.

No more light and warmth. Dark, cold. Empty. You walk around, looking for your mother, but you don't call her name because Adina will be angry.

Days pass. Empty days. Father is far away. Your sister feeds you, but she isn't warm. She doesn't sing at the fire. You walk out of the house. Empty fields.

You go to the road. Light brown, sandy in the sunlight. You walk along the road, watching your bare feet follow the sandy tracks. Up and down, your feet walk. Up and down.

Voices. You look up. The village. White buildings in white sunlight. Bright sunlight that hurts your eyes. People. Noise. Don't go to the village, boy. You don't like the village. Dead meat hanging in doorways. Flies. People.

"Look who's here!"

Young man smiling at you. Not warm.

"Jotham." He says your name. "Idiot boy," he sings. Other young men, laughing. "Big as a house, stupid as a donkey."

Laugh again and again. Close. Yellow teeth. Bad breath. A hand pushes you, and you almost fall down. Laughter.

An old man in dark clothing. Quiet, hard voice. Angry. Not angry at you. Warm. Long dark robe, gray beard. The young men go away.

"Go home, boy," the old man says. Kind. Then you are alone.



No light. No warmth. But the sun is harsh, bright, and hot.  
You walk to a shaded place and sit down.

Mama, all the world is cold and dark, cold and dark. Where are you, Mama?

Every day you come and sit in this spot. The young men don't notice you now. People go by, talking. You watch them. Cold. Cold, empty, and dark.

Until one day you feel something new. People, lots of people, and their voices hum loud in the air. Bees in sunlight. You see people coming around the corner, a crowd of people.

And from them comes light. The lightest light you've ever known, but not bright to hurt your eyes. The warmest warmth, but not hot, not smoky, not cruel.

You stand up. The crowd passes. Your heart beats, up and down. You lift your feet, following the people. They seem far ahead, moving fast, but you follow.

Mile after mile. Out into the country, the dry fields on either side of the road. You've never walked so far. Your bare feet, up and down on the rocky ground, begin to hurt.

Far ahead is an open place with trees. A little river. More people than you've ever seen. When you reach them, they do not bother you or notice you. They are looking toward the light. You want to go to the light, but they stand, shoulder to shoulder, blocking your way.

Moments pass. There is only one sound, a man's voice, one warmth and one light. Then the voice stops and the people

begin to turn away, as if there was no light.

“What did he say?” they ask. “What did he say?”

You push forward, among the people talking, turning away. And then you see the light.

It isn’t mother. It isn’t a woman. It is a man. He stands under a tree, talking to several young men who listen, eager. He is not facing you. You approach him from the side, a little bit from behind, and you get very close. You hear his strong voice, see his dark hair and beard, light-colored robe, muscular brown hands. He is not your mother. You cannot call him Mama.

And then you know. “Abba,” you say quietly.

He wheels around and looks at you with startled, knowing eyes.



“AB . . . BA.”

“Why do you call me that?” he asks.

“Abba,” you say again.

He probes you with his clear brown eyes.

Then, softly, “What’s your name?”

“Jo . . . Jo-tham.”

His eyes are not like Mama’s eyes. They are farther away, yet nearer, so near they go right inside you. They make you feel shy.

“Do you want to go with us, Jotham?”

## About the Author

Arthur Powers went to Brazil in 1969 as a Peace Corps volunteer and lived most of his adult life there. From 1985 to 1992, he and his wife, Brenda, with their two daughters, served as Catholic lay missionaries in eastern Amazon. Arthur subsequently directed Catholic Relief Services in Brazil. He and Brenda currently live with a daughter and granddaughter in Raleigh, North Carolina. He is on the pastoral council of St. Raphael parish, where he is active on the Social Justice Committee, a member of the Knights of Columbus, and chairman of the Diversity Committee (the parish comprises representatives from more than eighty ethnic and national groups).

Arthur was granted a fellowship in fiction from the Massachusetts Artists Foundation, three annual awards for short fiction from the Catholic Press Association, and earned second place in the 2008 Tom Howard Fiction Contest. His poetry and fiction have appeared in many magazines and anthologies, among them *America*, *Christianity & Literature*, *Dappled*

*Things; Hiram Poetry Review; Liguorian; Prime Number; Roanoke Review; St. Anthony Messenger; St. Katherine Review; South Carolina Review; Southern Poetry Review; Worcester Review; and two anthologies from Editions Bibliotekos. Press 53 published *A Hero for the People*, a collection of his short stories set in Brazil.*

\$16.95

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## *The Book of Jotham* by Arthur Powers

For 23 years the completed manuscript of *The Book of Jotham* sat in the author's desk drawer—typewritten—collecting dust and time. On an early autumn day in 2012, the manuscript arrived at Tuscany Press, and we discovered this compelling and moving story.

Jotham is a mentally challenged man-child who, like the other apostles, follows Jesus as Christ carries out his ministry and experiences death by crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Yet the other apostles—the dedicated Mary, Peter, Thomas, and the rest—while they care for Jotham and look out for him, don't understand why Jesus loves him so. Thomas even says, after Jesus offers a parable, "I don't see why all the pots can't be strong and beautiful."

Jotham may be different, but through him, we come to see Jesus and Jotham not just with our eyes, but also with our hearts.

PHOTO BY RICH CARTER



ARTHUR POWERS is himself a convert to Catholicism. After spending much time in Brazil in the Peace Corps, working with those for whom the Catholic faith is woven into life, and after meeting a woman who eventually became his wife, he came to question his very rational agnosticism. Powers was baptized into the Roman Catholic faith in 1976 as a thoughtful, aware adult of 29 years.



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