



The Pugilist at Rest: Stories

By Thom Jones

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Thom Jones made his literary debut in *The New Yorker* in 1991. Within six months his stories appeared in Harper's, Esquire, Mirabella, Story, Buzz, and in *The New Yorker* twice more. "The Pugilist at Rest" - the title story from this stunning collection - took first place in *Prize Stories 1993: The O. Henry Awards* and was selected for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories 1992*. He is a writer of astonishing talent. Jones's stories - whether set in the combat zones of Vietnam or the brittle social and intellectual milieu of an elite New England college, whether recounting the poignant last battles of an alcoholic ex-fighter or the hallucinatory visions of an American wandering lost in Bombay in the aftermath of an epileptic fugue - are fueled by an almost brutal vision of the human condition, in a world without mercy or redemption. Physically battered, soul-sick, and morally exhausted, Jones's characters are yet unable to concede defeat: his stories are infused with the improbable grace of the spirit that ought to collapse, but cannot. For in these extraordinary pieces of fiction, it is not goodness that finally redeems us, but the heart's illogical resilience, and the ennobling tenacity with which we cling to each other and to our lives. The publication of *The Pugilist at Rest* is a major literary event, heralding the arrival of an electrifying new voice in American fiction, and a writer of magnificent depth and range. With these eleven stories, Thom Jones takes his place among the ranks of this country's most important authors.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Thom Jones's first collection of stories is a revelation. In prose that sounds like nobody else, Jones channels a variety of distinctively different voices, from the lustful book editor of "Unchain My Heart" to the epileptic, amnesiac adman of the Dostoevskian fable "A White Horse." There's not a miss among these tales, but two in particular stand out: the title story, about a boxer and Vietnam vet who has plumbed the vicious depths of his own soul, and the almost unbearably intense chronicle of a woman fighting a losing battle with cancer, "I Want to Live!" "The world is replete with badness," says the aging fighter of "A Pugilist at Rest"; yet, as the narrator of "I Want to Live!" discovers, there is nothing stronger than the human will to go on, to *persist*--even in the face of the hell that exists right here on earth. It's not all gloom, doom, and napalm, however. There's also the surreal, Gogol-esque humor of "The Black Lights," in which the pysch-ward protagonist insists his only problem is epilepsy, yet hallucinates a giant, shuddering rabbit caught under his bed at night ("It's that rabbit on the Br'er Rabbit molasses jar. That rabbit with buckles on his shoes! Bow tie. Yaller teeth! Yaller! Yaller!") Then, too, Jones creates images of startling, surreal clarity amid the horror, like the dying lieutenant who remains on one knee even after being shot, "his remaining arm extended out to the enemy, palm upward in the soulful, heartrending gesture of Al Jolson doing a rendition of 'Mammy.'" Take a decidedly grim world-view, add a dose of existential slapstick, some Schopenhauer, an encyclopedic knowledge of pharmaceuticals, and a soundtrack by the Doors, and you have what may be the darkest, funniest, most urgent fictional debut in years. --*Mary Park*

From Publishers Weekly

Jones's gritty and poetic debut short-story collection was selected by PW as one of the best books of 1993. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Jones, a former marine and amateur boxer, recently published short stories in *The New Yorker* and Harper's. The themes dominating his first collection are violence, adultery, alcoholism, epilepsy, and madness. The sheer visceral intensity of Jones's prose is amplified by the sensitivity with which his characters are drawn: a soldier in Vietnam recognizes his capacity for violence in an ancient Roman statue; an abusive womanizer reacts with instinctive viciousness when he falls in love; a janitor attempts to lure a slow student from a potentially disastrous relationship; a dying woman finds solace in the pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Jones's gritty yet refined prose stands in sharp contrast to the more apologetic work of National Book Award winner Tim O'Brien (*Going After Cacciato* , LJ 12/15/77; *The Things They Carried* , LJ 2/15/90), with whom critical comparison is inevitable. This outstanding collection is sure to be in demand in public libraries.

- *Mark Annichiarico, "Library Journal"*

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