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Halfway Decent Sinners

Michael Cleary
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These poems couple boyhood shenanigans with a spiritual heart, a brilliant mix that the author first established in his award-winning book, *Hometown U.S.A.*, which won the 1992 American Series Award. Since then his poetry has lost neither the ironic wit nor the defiant tenderness that marked that volume. He continues to write with irreverence and insight, mixing tough-guy language with compassion. He's a master storyteller with a wise man's introspection about what to be nostalgic and angry and kind about.

His titles typify his tone and offer a tantalizing taste of his subject matter as well as his dazzling wordplay. "Body English," "Bathtub Virgin," "Chemo Sabe," "Word Farm," "Cob Job," "Middle Aged Men Just Know," "Jesus Has Left the Building," "Going All the Way First Time," and "Second Marriage Polka" indicate the way outrageous youthful memory combines with an adult's consciousness of maturity, mortality, and how hard it is to engage loss with dignity. Many of the poems explore Catholic initiations with a risky mix of sexuality and catechism as in "Altar Boy's First Mass" in which the robing before Mass is compared to "something like your first real date / the girl drifts in and out of / like a wish and you a bungle of awkwardness / with no place to put your hands / or eyes / except everywhere / you've been dreaming about."

This duality often punches Cleary's poems into perceptions both sensory and spiritual. In "Selfish Wants," he writes: "mortal pleasure overpowering as the sacred rigmarole of faith so that God still mattered but / we mattered too, something inside us not awful / but awfully changed, a bother / like the thin cut from an envelope licked wrong, / how the tongue kept discovering itself all day." Old punishments and revenge run through Cleary's boyhood misadventures with Sister Lard Ass but soften to unsentimental empathy in the Aunt Sara poems, a series given over to a woman lost in infidelity and wasted love.

On the surface, Cleary's poems are absorbing narratives, but a literary hidden ball trick lurks beneath. It would be easy to think his meaning is resting in the hand of the pitcher, but then there it is, flashing suddenly in the second baseman's glove, the secret surprise of the poems' true strategy. His work always pivots to a lyrical center, holding a brother ridden with cancer who tosses out a joke as he catches what courage he can ("Chemo Sabe"). Cleary tells human stories with an unpretentious heart and great skill. Though the collection will have wide appeal, it will score big with baby boomers approaching these same issues and memories.

ANNE-MARIE OOMEN (August 7, 2006)

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