



## Good Hearts

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A writer's characters are his own property, and there is nothing to prevent him from taking them up after an interval of years to see how they have been marked by the passage of time. Sequels of this kind have been prominent in the 1980's--John Updike's RABBIT IS RICH and Walker Percy's THE THANATOS SYNDROME are but examples--and many of them have been successful. Some sequels, however, leave the reader with a strong conviction that there ought to be a law against the recycling of fictional creations.

A LONG AND HAPPY LIFE introduced one of the most appealing characters in contemporary fiction: Rosacoke Mustian, a spirited young woman whose on-again, off-again romance with Wesley Beavers is related with a mixture of gentleness, lyricism, and wit. Though Price has written other much-praised novels in his distinguished career, A LONG AND HAPPY LIFE has remained by far his most popular work.

In GOOD HEARTS, Price revisits Rosa and Wesley after twenty-eight years of marriage. They have a comfortable house in Raleigh, North Carolina. Wesley, fifty years old, is a mechanic; Rosa, forty-eight, is a secretary at the English department of a local university; they have a married son, Horatio, who is sketched as something of a nincompoop. The opening pages of the novel make it clear that Rosa and Wesley's marriage, seemingly secure, is in fact deeply vulnerable: Their routines are shattered when Wesley runs off to Nashville. A week later, Rosa-- alone in bed with Wesley gone--is raped by a Bible-reading stranger who believes that he hears the voice of God. The remainder of the novel is intended to show how all this, strangely, works together for good.

Intention is one thing; execution is another. This is a book in which practically nothing rings true. A vital section of the narrative is presented in the form of Rosa's diary, which she begins to keep after Wesley's departure. The diary, written with a novelist's virtuosity, is impossible to accept on its own terms; particularly unbelievable is the manner in which Rosa describes the rape. Price thus loses the reader's trust in the early going and never regains it. GOOD HEARTS proves once again that even for the veteran novelist, each book is a new challenge; there is no guarantee of success.

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