

*For your entertainment. Twenty stories, each very different from the next, each complete unto itself. There is no central theme running through the book, rather an eclectic selection of tales from which to choose. Some are true, some are not, all are interesting and enjoyable, some unforgettable. Enjoy the ODDNESS.*

## **The Oddness Collection: Selected Short Stories**

by Michael Francis John

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# oddness

A SELECTION OF STORIES



Michael John

# *The Oddness Collection*

*Selected Short Stories*

*Second Edition*

*Michael Francis John*

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## 1. A Miracle on Walnut Street

*Jamie knew that life before breakfast* was technically possible, but found no incentive to explore the dead zone between eyes opening and the taste of food in his mouth.

If the eggs cracked cleanly and their contents slid featherless and unbroken into the pan. If the bread and bacon showed little or no green mold and required little or no scraping, and if he had cleverly avoided the threat of eviction again, these omens would portend the possibility for a good day.

A good day for Jamie was accumulating enough cash in his pockets for booze and a little surplus for artist's materials and rent.

Utilities were of secondary importance, and those annoying bills would eventually be paid, when he felt the need for gas or electricity. Food was usually available from the big church on the corner of Main and Walnut.

*Jamie Walcott was an artist*, primarily a painter, but more accurately described as one who applies different stuff to various surfaces. This rather vague, though reasonable definition evolved during Jamie's artistic endeavors and, during his tenure at the Amberlight apartments.

Many times he was gripped by a need to project an idea onto board or canvas, but often found himself with neither media nor surface to display his talent. He would improvise. Any substance of color from old vegetables to animal fecal matter would be pressed, scraped, ground and mixed to match the colors in his visions. Discarded boxes, plywood, and building materials would serve as his canvas.

Although Jamie's prodigious artistic talents were never in doubt, his finished works were. Collectors would not entertain



hanging artwork that would decay and change dramatically within a few months. Galleries refused to display images that filled their halls and display rooms with foul smells and attracted flies.

Jamie's primary transportation was a rusty, well-used ladies bicycle a recent gift from an aging admirer. It had no bell or lights, but a large wicker basket attached to the saddle proved far more useful. He was now able to peddle to liquor stores and convenience markets, also to various local work sites.

*He eventually decided to accept* a few offers of work, hoping to earn enough money to buy more conventional artistic materials. The part-time teaching and casual laboring jobs often raised sufficient money for him to eat at fast food restaurants and buy artistic supplies. His fortunes changed noticeably as a result of these labors. Changed, not particularly improved, for any lasting improvement would require a dramatic decrease in his consumption of liquor.

He lived happily in his way, usually beyond the reach of romantic entanglements and just below the daily social radar. Occasionally he found himself indebted to the landlord and various utility companies.

*Beyond the reach* of romantic entanglements perhaps, but he was not beyond the reach of the blond bitch. She would enter through his always open door at any time. With no words exchanged between them, she would reach into his pants and relieve him of any nasty pressures accumulated during his stress filled week. Sometimes with her fingers, sometimes with her mouth, her techniques were consistent and impeccable. Jamie never questioned her actions, believing such behavior was of divine origin. There was some justification for that

belief as the bitch considered herself a masturbatory angel, an angelic therapist, finding Jamie a most deserving case for her attentions.

Jamie was friendly to most but had few trusted friends. He avoided approaches from others, preferring his own company. His one staunch ally and constant companion would appear to him in times of need. After all, he reasoned, what are good friends for?

***Thursday morning before heat*** rose in glassy shimmering waves from the sidewalk. Before the hot winds blew tumbleweeds playfully along the street, Jesse James stood in line. Dust from the rocky lowland trail clung heavily to the folds in his clothes. A small gray cloud drifted upward as he pulled a soiled bandanna from his shirt pocket and wiped dirt from the corners of his eyes. Rubbing a gaunt, unshaven face with the back of his hand, he stared intently at the counter hand.

Fluorescent lighting above the checkout counter washed the clerk's pale, rounded features with an unflattering yellow cast. The little man employed a habitual giggle just loud enough to distract or annoy. He fussed unnecessarily, plump sausage fingers fluttering nervously above the register keys.

Moving slowly with the line, the outlaw gazed about him. Losers and loiterers, pompous and pious were all around without direction or resolve. None here were marked with dignity or touched by destiny; neither friend nor enemy in sight worthy of salute. Noise ebbed and flowed with cresting waves of inane gossip. Snatches of muted conversation were somehow reassuring, connecting him briefly to the small stream of humanity that trickled slowly by aisles and counters towards the door.



Jesse faced the clerk. His left hand held a bottle of cheap red wine; right hand lightly caressed the grip of an old break top pistol inside the waistband of his pants. In a sudden moment of quiet stretching, like an ocean between living and dying, the counter hand unknowingly found reprieve. He grinned happily, his chubby face alive with pleasure as he methodically counted change from the outlaw's last ten dollar bill.

Jesse caught a reflection of innocence in the smile and indulged himself in his decision to spare a life. Unaware of anything beyond his small domain, the officer of wines, spirits and groceries continued with cheerful banter as the outlaw moved to the exit. Peering through the noonday glare, Jesse shaded his eyes against the unexpected brightness. Beyond parked cars filed in orderly rows, a raised knoll with trees and bright manicured grass promised shade and rest.

He sat, propping himself against a tree. With legs drawn up, he pulled an old stained hat low enough to cover his eyes. Settling into a comfortable position, the outlaw opened his bottle and drank.

*Within the hour he jerked awake* from ragged fretful sleeping and slowly pulled himself into a sitting position. Another long comforting draught swallowed from the bottle as he struggled to remember the morning's events.

For many years, booze stood as a buffer against normality and boredom. Of late, excessive drinking had become a needed liniment to soothe the time he spent between waking and sleeping. So it was today. Another empty bottle marked the transition from morning to afternoon. The last mouthful of wine was swallowed against a sudden rising nausea. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists, choking back familiar sickness

until relief came. The sweat felt good on his brow, cold in the midday Texas heat.

Jamie stood unsteadily for a few minutes. The wine he had recently swallowed now lay sour in his gut. Moving out from his grassy bed he stumbled slowly along Seventeenth Street, often steadying himself against walls and trees.

At Seventeenth and Walnut, he paused again before sitting on a low ornamental garden wall. Shading his eyes against the afternoon glare, he gave thanks for his very good friend, the outlaw Jesse James. He always appeared to him in times of stress or pain. More frequently of late, it seemed.

*Jesus Christ, Redeemer*, and soulful-eyed savior stood suddenly before him. Jamie dropped from the wall to his knees; spread wide both arms and bowed his head, thankful to find redemption so unexpectedly. Jesus spoke slowly with somber intonation, gazing down in sorrow upon another wandering soul searching for peace in a cruel world of darkness.

"Jamie, Jamie. Obviously, our last conversation meant nothing to you. Once again I see you fucked up, crawling along the god damned sidewalk and behaving like an asshole.

I think this is the third time in as many days someone has called in a complaint about you."

Jamie heard those words from his lord and savior, felt the sounds of admonition like scalding rain upon his skin. Lifting his eyes, he saw Saint Peter on his left side, Jesus Christ to his right. Without warning, he was held beneath his arms and raised to his feet. Hard steel hands gripped him. Cruel burning fingers left smoldering holes in his flesh. Saint Peter spoke.

"Listen to me jack off. This is your last warning. One more call and you're gone, you hear me? Three days in the fuckin tank. I will personally see that your stay will not be a happy

one. I don't give a shit if you decide to kill yourself, but I do care that you do it in a public place."

*They left as suddenly as they appeared* silent and magnificent, with absolute authority. Saint Peter with the fiery eyes appeared again. "Look, man; I hate to see anyone waste their God given talent. Go to Jabbies. Get a coffee, straighten up for a while."

Grasping his wrist, the archangel of the Lord forced a glowing parchment into his hand.

"This is for that fresh start you're going to make for us today eh!"

A mile or so away, fat girl and the blond bitch moved with their latest haul.

All groceries were properly positioned within their shopping cart. Some smaller items were paid for; others were liberated from the local supermarket stockpile.

The girls had about half mile to go on the miserably hot street before reaching the sanctuary of Amberlight. Amberlight apartments stood at the far end of Walnut Street. A recent newspaper article described the ten shabby buildings that were Amberlight apartments as, "an affront to our community."

For many years the seedy block of clapboard dwellings had withstood buffeting from self-serving newspaper columnists and pompous provincial politicians. Every outraged voice claimed to represent "community interests."

*Actually, Amberlight apartments* were a community in their own right. Within those decrepit boundaries, many a rogue and misfit found temporary shelter. Blending perfectly into the ramshackle hub of humanity was the painter Jamie Walcott, Fat Girl, and the bitch.

The two women continually concerned themselves with Jamie's welfare, both, believing he was incapable of functioning in the modern world without a mother. They bought food and old clothes for him, their well-meaning ministrations often driving him to distraction.

Jamie was well respected as a gifted artist. Ragged, paint-dappled clothes covered his lanky frame. He wore this unintentional fashion statement as easily as a New York stockbroker would wear a heavy Italian suit.

A wide-brimmed straw hat often concealed his face, but never diminished the light burning behind his bright, hopeful eyes.

***Amberlight afforded him a tiny kitchen*** and two small rooms. An old sleeping bag served as his bed. He would retire to either room when sufficient space was available between sketches, paintings, and frames. A small iron pan boiled, fried, stewed, or baked any edible scraps of convenience. It was occasionally cleaned when flavors conflicted noticeably.

Life was not easy for Jamie. His artistic soul burned with a driving passion for painting and drawing. In conflict, an equally pressing need to pay rent followed at his heel like the unnerving shadow of a relentless creditor. This depressing specter of responsibility was usually held at bay by a liquor bottle sometimes, by the shade of the outlaw Jesse James.

To address rent paying and eating requirements, Jamie would undertake unskilled laboring work. He would also teach at the local community college. Either occupation was given equal prominence but always depended on his recent intake of booze.

***There were about twenty*** occupants of Amberlight apartments at any given time. A few of the transient renters

claimed to have found a permanent home, and it was to their home that Fat Girl and the blond bitch made their way. *Their way* led to the end of Walnut Street, undoubtedly passing a recently reborn Jamie Walcott again. Fat Girl spoke with some concern.

“Thought they were going to haul the poor old bastard away this time.” The bitch ran her fingers through stringy blond hair and shook her head.

“He ain’t *really* old. About 50, maybe a few years either way.”

“Well, let’s ask him then. He ain’t goin nowhere in a hurry,” Fat Girl replied with a chuckle.

Jamie raised his arm and forced himself to straighten cramped fingers and read a few words from his parchment of salvation. Twisted into a crumpled wad, glowing with unmistakable righteousness was a five-dollar bill.

“Hey, babe! How old you?”

***Jamie focused with some difficulty*** upon the familiar rotund outline from whence came this insolent question. He mentally processed the implications for a while. Brother Frank died somewhere about 1915. Jesse shot down by Bob Ford must have been 30 years earlier at least. Perhaps 140 then so, what the hell was he doing here talking to two disreputable Walnut Street nightwalkers? He closed his eyes tightly for a few seconds to restructure a kaleidoscope of confusion into meaningful reality.

“forty,” he replied, “40 years old. That was this morning, though, my sisters. This afternoon I was reborn by the infinite grace of the archangel and sweet Jesus Christ himself. Behold a sign.” He held the five-dollar bill aloft.

“We thought them two cops was going to throw your shabby ass in the can,” said the bitch; not at all impressed at the sight of his five-dollar ticket to salvation.

***“I stood,” replied Jamie*** “In the shadow of my Lord, Insulated, from the deceit and cunning of my enemies.”

“Well excuse us. We just thought you was drunk again. For sure didn’t realize that Jesus was in the middle of savin you.” Jamie ignored the Fat Girl, smiled indulgently at her unseemly comments.

“I will,” he said, “proceed to Jabbies; purchase a cup of coffee or two then return to the Amberlight apartments. Upon entering my home, I shall cast myself down upon my knees to give thanks for the blessing of my rebirth. I will pray earnestly for you troubled skanky ladies, and ask that a miracle of forgiveness be bestowed upon both your scaly bimbo heads.”

“Skanky?” Blond bitch glared at him angrily. “Don’t bother you too much when my Skanky hands are rubbing your little dick.”

He heard their loud, derisive laughter and scornful comments. At that moment, the ghost of Jesse James appeared like a misty shadow at his side.

***From the corner of his eye,*** Jamie saw the outlaws right hand move slowly to a well-worn pistol holstered at his waist. Simple well practiced movements. His face betrayed no signs of anger. A few thoughtless words from the blond bitch probably saved both women from sudden death on that hot paved sidewalk.

“A miracle,” she said, “Yeah show us your miracle Jamie, ask God to give us a buck or two right now.”

“Make it ten, and you can come home with me, baby,” Fat Girl said giggling foolishly. “Sheet! Honey make, that a twenty

and we will both come home with you,” added the bitch. Jamie closed his eyes against their blasphemous laughter. Perhaps his five dollars would persuade both of them not to accompany him anywhere.

He remembered his Messiah, thought upon those wondrous miracles of Jesus and asked earnestly for a sign.

“Not for me though dear lord” he entreated. “As you know, I am already a believer since early this afternoon. I ask for these poor hapless whores now standing before me to receive a sign that they may repent, and find such joy as I have.”

*He recalled the miracles of his savior* from childhood Sunday school teachings, feeding a multitude on the shores of Galilee, walking upon the waters, transforming water into wine.

Great happiness borne of sudden enlightenment slowly washed over Jamie. Here was revealed a true sign given to him from above. There, upon that dirty, dusty Walnut Street sidewalk a supernatural event of astonishing proportions was revealed. Here was an endorsement of ancient biblical truths-an unforgettable sight for all who witnessed the miracle. Jamie opened his eyes and gazed upon Fat Girl and the bitch.

He smiled with serene understanding and spoke softly to his audience. “It is given for you to see my two sad, sorry sisters. Here is a new direction to follow and dedicate with great fear unto the Lord. Repent, disgraceful daughters of dirt and find peace as I have.”

His eyes rolled towards the clouds.

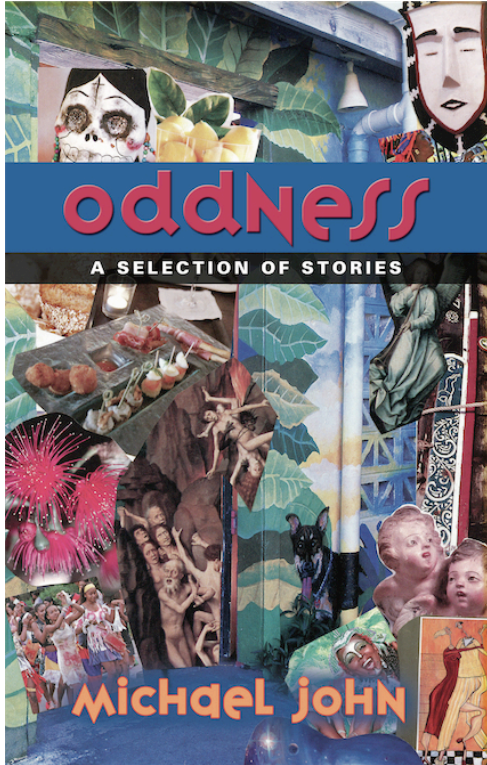
In one graceful movement, Jamie turned on his heel, unzipped his pants and pissed with great satisfaction against a slender flowering cherry tree growing from the sidewalk.



*A stream of pale yellow urine* curved, splashing brightly against the ornamental tree trunk. His voice rose to a bellow, inviting the attention of several pedestrians.

The sisters of shame were struck dumb at the sight of this revelation, and that in itself was a small miracle. Both women stood silent and amazed at the sound of his voice. Jamie addressed the rapidly growing throng.

“Before a great multitude, Jesus himself turned water into fine wine, so then by all good grace have I now turned fine wine into water, Behold!”



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