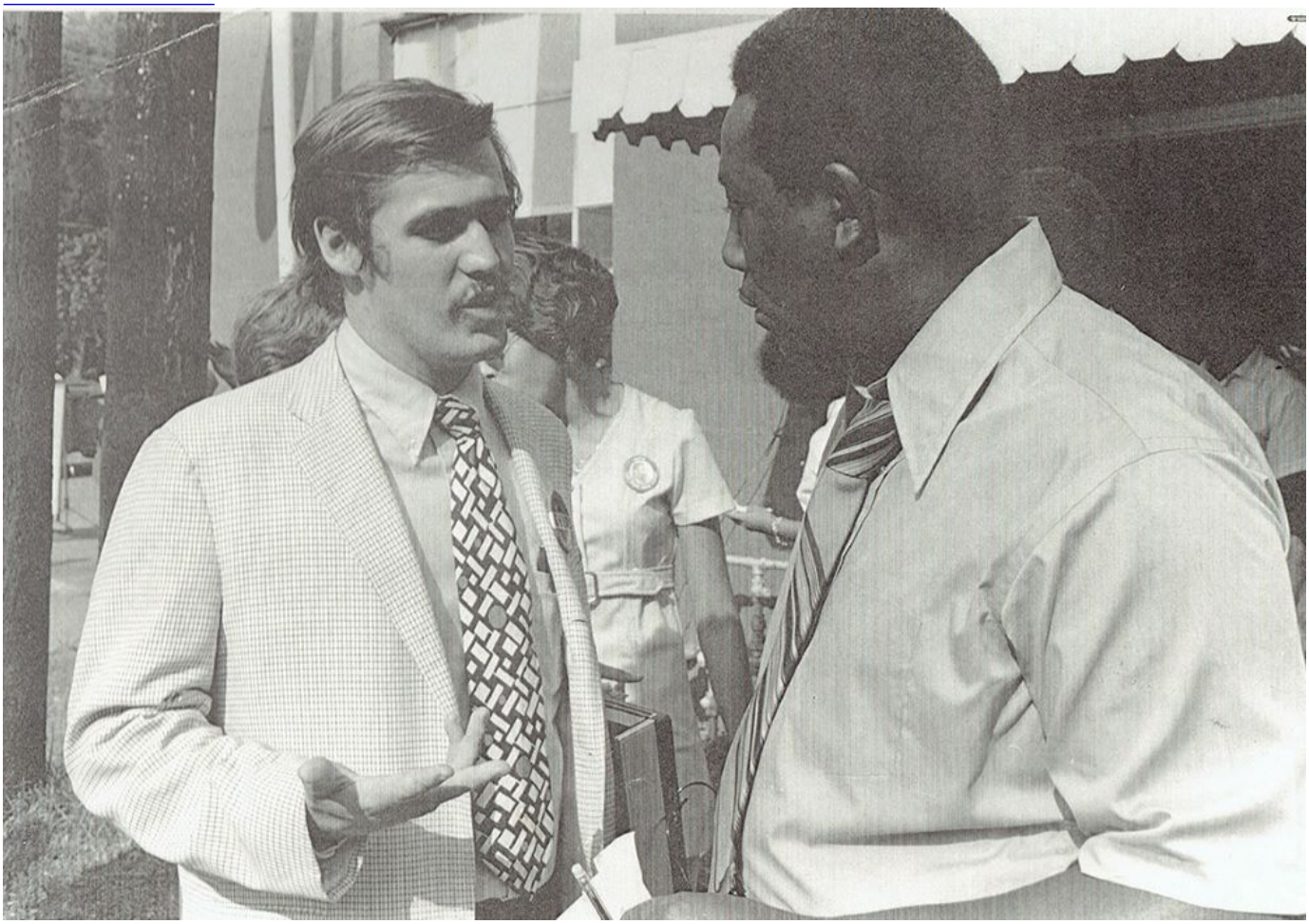
Culture

Book Reviews



Longtime NCR contributor Jason Berry is pictured with Mississippi politician Charles Evers in 1971. "Conversations with Jason Berry," published by University Press of Mississippi as part of their Literary Conversations series, compiles 23 interviews in which Berry reflects on the forces that have shaped his work. (Courtesy of Jason Berry)



by Jason Berry

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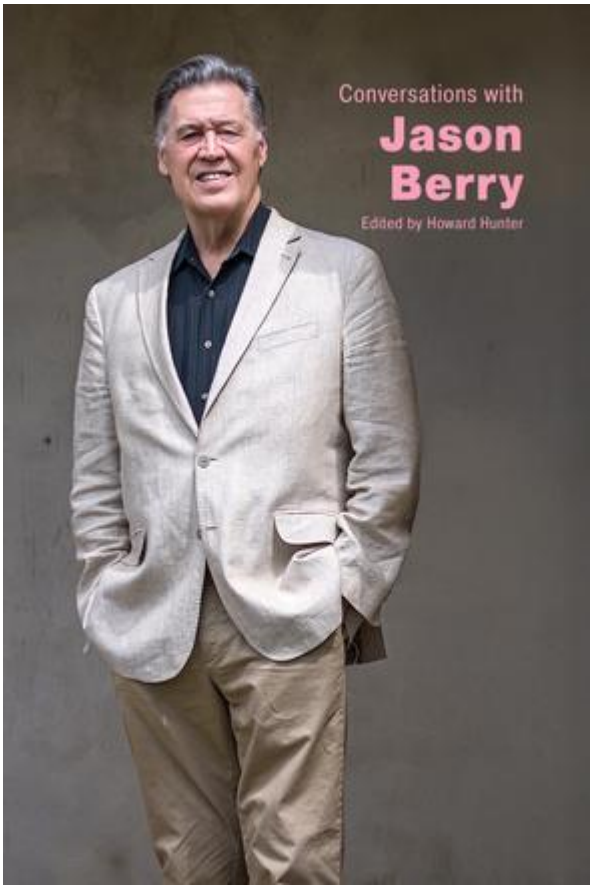
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April 25, 2026

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The journalistic legacy of longtime National Catholic Reporter contributor Jason Berry has now been preserved by University Press of Mississippi as part of their Literary Conversations series. The new book *Conversations with Jason Berry* compiles 23 archived interviews in which Berry reflects on the forces that have shaped his work — including uncovering corruption in the Catholic Church, and chronicling the rich cultural and political landscape of Louisiana.



Conversations with Jason Berry
Howard Hunter, editor
218 pages; University Press of Mississippi
$25.00

The following are excerpts from the book.

"Rockburn Presents," a cable public affairs TV talk show in Canada, 2012

***Rockburn*: The beginning of your work with Charles Evers led to a book you wrote (*Amazing Grace*, 1973) Were you always inclined to go in that direction? Is that the career path you planned for yourself?**

Berry: Not exactly. I wanted to be a writer. My mother read to me a great deal. I lived in a house with books. I was a voracious reader. I wrote stories as a kid coming up. I would go see science fiction movies and get frightened by them, come home, and write out my version. Plagiarism at an early age ... I actually came in second for a short story award in high school. I wrote for the campus newspaper in college. I wanted to go back to the South, but I wanted to make a difference … I went through Georgetown in the middle of the revolution, one foot planted in the great books, the other out marching at demonstrations. When I realized Evers was going to run for governor in 1971, I knew someone in Mississippi close to someone who knew him, three degrees of separation, and I just drove down there after college and presented myself as a volunteer. He and I had an immediate spark. He liked me, I liked him, and I got hired for $75 a week as the press secretary; it was a life-defining experience. I spent six months traveling through Mississippi looking at the world through the lens of Black people and it changed me dramatically.

"Questions for Jason Berry," Zack Czaia, 2017

***Czaia*: What writers, artists and teachers have shaped the ways you look at your own vocation — both as a journalist and writer? In what ways have they done this for you?**

Shakespeare and Dante, always. My mother Mary Frances Devine Berry was a primary influence, giving me books as a child; she did her master's thesis on Dryden at Tulane as I went through Jesuit. My grandmother, Beline Lamar Devine, acted in French Quarter plays when I was a kid. Imagine your Mia shambling as *Mrs. McThing* ! At Georgetown, Professor John Glavin was inspiring; he made Yeats and Blake come alive. Writing that first book, I nearly overdosed on Faulkner. Still in my twenties, Clarence John Laughlin, a surrealist photographer, and Michael P. Smith, a photographer of Black culture, opened thematic pathways in New Orleans. Then came Camus, Hemingway, García-Márquez, Orwell, Simone de Beauvoir, Walker

Percy, Flannery O'Connor, Ernest Gaines, Albert Murray, and Wole Soyinka, each exerting influence as I stumbled into my thirties. When I discovered the abuse cover-up, I went deep into church history. I got to know Andrew Greeley, Eugene Kennedy, and later on, Garry Wills; I read many of their books, enjoyed their friendships. I miss Andy and Gene dearly and appreciate Garry's wisdom. Lately, I have been reading Robert Pinsky's poetry.

I couldn't put *Last of the Red Hot Poppas* down. The vividness of each portrait in the novel, the intricacy of the backroom Louisiana politics, the outrageous and funny dialogue — all of them kept the best part of my attention. How much are you conscious of the tools of the novelist — plot, character, pacing, dialogue — when you're crafting nonfiction — specifically church-focused work?

Thank you for not putting that book down. New Journalism was the emerging standard when I started out, authors like Mailer, Jimmy Breslin, and Tom Wolfe using structural dynamics of the novel in magazine pieces. and nonfiction. I wrote two unpublished novels before my second book, *Up From the Cradle of Jazz*, so I had a toolbox of sorts. In the three Catholic books, I found people thrown into a maelstrom tearing at their spirituality. The abuse survivors were like traumatized Vietnam vets; many lawyers representing victims lost their faith; the priests and nuns clamoring for justice added a powerful layer; Vatican officials I met on the second and third books were baroque figures. My goal was three-dimensional profiles, and a narrative line on people's lives in a clash with injustice and religious power.

It occurs to me that you might be channeling a little Dante in a work like this. Can you talk about the ways this poet has influenced your work, both fiction and church-related journalism?

I read *The Divine Comedy* at Georgetown and have been rereading it for years. In the "Paradiso," Dante meets St. Peter Damian, the medieval crusader against clergy sex abuse, some hope for sinful me. If Dante were alive, he would add a rung in "Inferno" for the pedophiles and their sheltering bishops. Yes, as Catholics we believe in forgiveness and redemption, but St. Augustine hit the mark: "Justice is that virtue which gives everyone his due."

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"Filmmaker 5" interview with Kami Spangenberg, 2022

***Spangenberg*: You present the jazz funeral tradition using vintage photos, archival footage, historical recreations, interviews, and filming of modern-day jazz funerals. How did this combination of material influence how you structured the film ("City of a Million Dreams")?**

I began meeting in 2016 with Tim Watson at his studio Ariel Montage; we'd worked on several projects over the years. Tim is a superb artist of visual narratives. Owing to the range of materials you cite, I also turned to my daughter Simonette Berry, a painter-sculptor who had been working for several years as a film set artist; she'd also written for a local magazine years before. That's a good skill set for any documentary. Sim began a massive inventory of photographs and historical images. The three of us spent much of the next four years planning the production shoots, working on how to meld the range of materials, and shaping the script through more changes than I can count.

Though the film is based on my book, I felt they deserved to share script credit and as co-producers because of the collaborative effort. Simonette had done a storyboard for the Congo Square sequences when I cast lines to find a choreographer, someone with the historical knowledge of African dances in the antebellum era. Monique Moss is a dancer with deep knowledge of the African diaspora. Within an hour of our meeting, I knew she was right for this. Monique insisted I bring in Titos Sompa, a master percussionist from Kongo, who was living in Detroit, and his brother, Jean Claude Biza Sompa, who teaches in the University of Michigan music program. Among the fifteen musicians we had several drummers from Ivory Coast living in New York, and Seguenon Kone, an Ivorian multi-instrumentalist in New Orleans. Harris Done, our DP made several trips from Los Angeles for key shoots and didn't mind sleeping in my guest bedroom. George Ingmire, the sound engineer wove through the funeral parades with a brilliant ear for balancing the instrumental voices ...

With a few notable exceptions [editorial adviser Doug Blush], everyone else involved in the production is part of the growing film industry here. The Louisiana film tax credits we received were extremely helpful. But we could not have made this film without the support of executive producer Bernard "Biff" Pettingill, a forensic economist who grew up here, saw the potential, and believed in what we were

doing.

("City of a Million Dreams" is now streaming on TubiTV and other platforms.)

Read this next: A moral order has been broken, and clergy abuse survivors still quest for justice