

A full-hearted story collection

Jess Walter is back. Not that the Spokane author ever really went anywhere, or maybe he did but that's not the point. What I'm trying to get at here is that while Walter's last novel, "The Cold Millions," offered his dependably fine and perceptive takes on humanity, it was a sober tale.

Conversely, "The Angel of Rome," a brand-new collection of short stories, displays the author's effervescence. Walter has a kaleidoscopic ability to consider the human

experience — pathos, love, anxiety, heroism, hubris, terror, hope — but with each twist of the plot, he reconfigures those bits so that we see intriguing new angles to a character's motivations and options.

For those who love Northwest settings for fiction, this volume delivers. From Bend to Boise, Idaho and Spokane, Washington, to Stateline, Idaho, Walter particularly focuses on the interior Northwest.

But the title story in this collection takes

This week's book

'The Angel of Rome' by Jess Walter
HarperCollins – 288 pp – \$27.99

place in Italy. "The Angel of Rome" is a lovely novelette about Jack Rigel, a hapless undergraduate from Nebraska who fudged the facts on his application to get into a Latin class taught at the Vatican. Rigel's real motivation in getting to Italy is to reinvent himself as someone who's exciting in order to impress a particular girl — or, really, any girl.

When Rigel arrives in the eternal city, he quickly realizes that he is in way over his head. His command of Latin is bad and his Italian isn't much better. But when he bumbles onto a movie set and meets a cast of characters whose very business is reinventing themselves for each film they appear in, he gains some insight and impromptu coaching.

"The Angel of Rome" is a delightful bonbon of a story, leavened with laugh-out-loud laughter. But it contains some observations that readers may recognize as useful life lessons, too.

In this story, and in several others, Walter writes about aging. His characters grapple

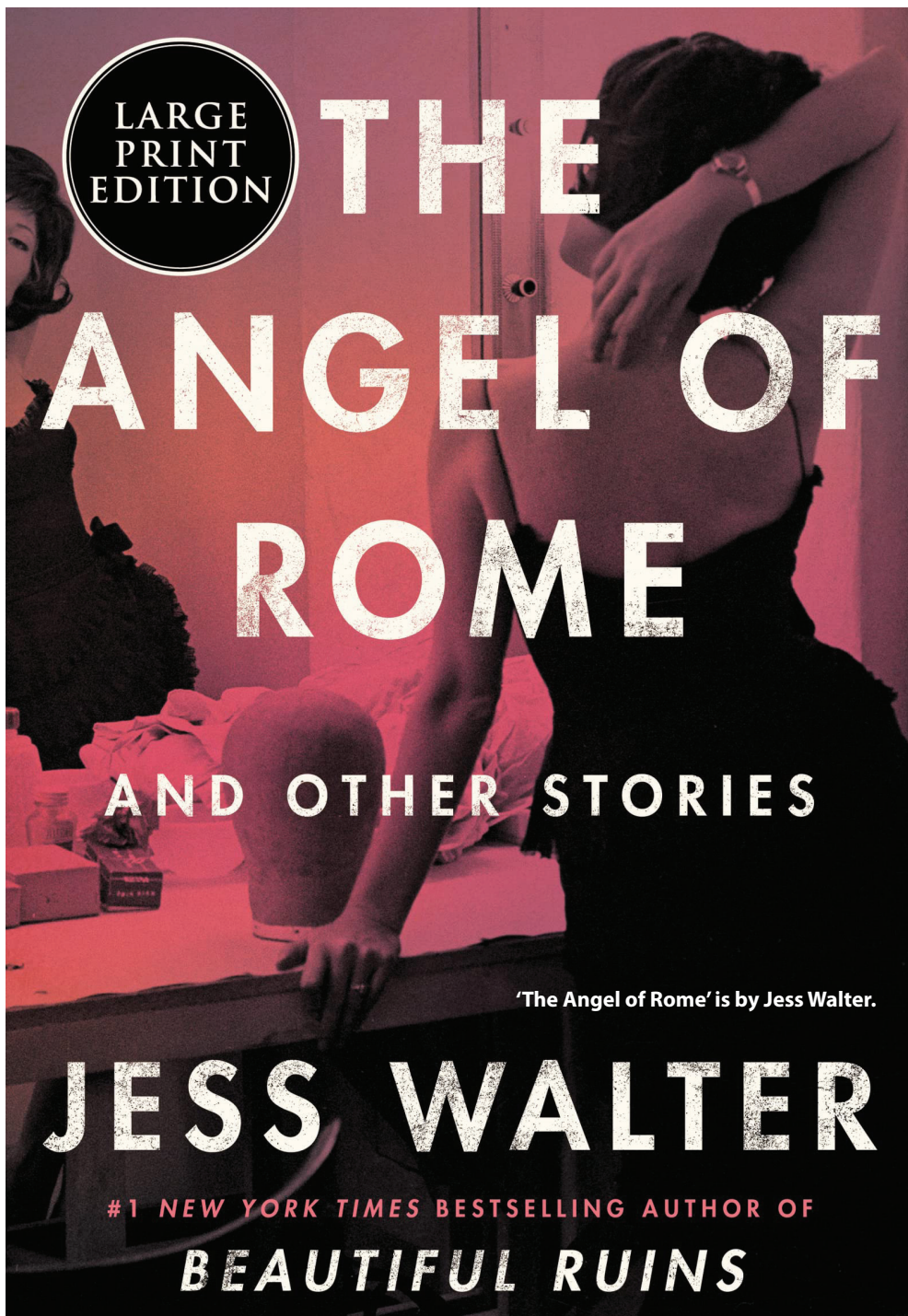
with the physical aches and the bittersweet wisdom that seem to pile up without one's noticing over an accretion of years.

In a story called "Fran's Friend Has Cancer," a crotchety old husband named Max rues that stretches of life that once seemed limitless are now but "a finger snap" when he reflects on it all.

In "Before You Blow," when a woman notices a bus bench advertisement featuring a personal injury lawyer, that's all it takes for her to remember the exact moment, decades earlier, when she became an adult — and it's not what you might think. Still another character in another story believes that, when it comes to memory, feeling is more important than precision.

There is only one clunker in this collection: "Balloons" is about a lascivious next-door neighbor. For this reader, it went over like a lead balloon. But the rest of these stories — oh my. They are filled with wry wit, politics and poignancy. They'll surprise you and lift your spirits. This collection, overall, is a winner.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaralmcm@gmail.com.



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