

New York Times Jan. 7, 1990

ALL ABOUT WOMEN

By Andrew M. Greeley

384 pp. New York: Tor Books (St. Martin's Press)

As he did with his 1987 novel *Patience of a Saint*, Father Andrew Greeley affixes an explanatory note to this collection, importuning that his title is less audacious than it sounds. He does not "purport to know 'all about women.'" Rather, each of these 23 stories is about a woman, and in each "a woman either is or creates an opportunity of grace . . . or is visited by an offer of grace." His best story, "Andrea," gives us an absorbing and chilling account of an eerie young widow driven through Arizona by a Navy commander captivated by her while haunted by guilt over the men who died in his command. Three other interrelated tales—"Peggy," "Paula," and "Deirdre"—present the collection's only rounded and convincing character, Peggy Walsh, struggling to resume her life after the death of her husband. Unfortunately, despite the benevolence behind them, the remaining stories contribute to the mounting evidence that Fr. Greeley's depth and skill lie in his theological polemics rather than his fiction. Long a champion for a more powerful role for women within the Church, here he treats women with a syrupy reverence that itself becomes a patronizing insult. As if to serve as a metaphor for the collection, the Virgin Mary becomes a contemporary character in one story ["Ms. Carpenter"], and even she cloys. His women aren't real. But then, neither are the pulpy narratives in which they appear. These are antiseptic tales whose sentimentality savors of the Hollywood 1930s and television 1950s, clogged with cumbersome prose belaboring the obvious and self-congratulatory forays into sex in the form of adolescent leers. Narrated with thin sanctimony by haughty priests, many of these stories might be retitled "Father Knows Best." If so, not about fiction.