

## A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN REIMRINGER

### What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

*Vestments* started as an exploration of the conflict between a brawling, alcoholic father and a son who seeks refuge from his father's world by becoming a Catholic priest. The book gained momentum when I

so I saw them as people with lives and concerns alongside their religious callings, but getting that on the page took a lot of doing. I read a number of books by and about priests, and then I had a couple of Saint Paul priests review the manuscript for accuracy. When one priest who read

**"The book became so much about Saint Paul. We moved here right after my father died, and I was missing him, and writing about his city became an act of remembrance. That sense of belonging somewhere—which I'd never had before I moved here—permeates the book."**

moved in 2001 to Saint Paul. I'd never lived here before, but my father's family had lived in Saint Paul since 1857, and exploring my heritage led to the city of Saint Paul becoming a character in its own right. In addition to the priest's story, the book became somewhat of a love letter to the city.

### What research did you undertake in writing *Vestments*?

I did a lot of research on priests. I'd grown up Catholic and knew priests and nuns as friends of my parents,

the manuscript asked if I was an ex-priest, I felt great relief that I'd managed to make that part of the book convincing.

### What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing the book?

Making the Catholic priesthood a legitimate choice for James Dressler. As a writer in the modern world, how do you make a convincing case that a man might choose celibacy and obedience over an intelligent, attractive, successful woman?

### What was your journey to becoming a published author?

Around age 10 I started writing a lot of bad novels. But I had no idea how one became a writer. I was the first generation of my family to go to college. We didn't know any writers. And you believe you have to do something practical, so I got a degree in journalism and worked as a newspaper editor and then a library clerk before finally taking the plunge and going to grad school for creative writing in my 30s. So I was always circling books and writing, in every job.

### How does being a Minnesotan inform your writing?

Well, hugely. The book became so much about Saint Paul. We moved here right after my father died, and I was missing him, and writing about his city became an act of remembrance. That sense of belonging somewhere—which I'd never had before I moved here—permeates the book. James Dressler belongs in Saint Paul. So much so that, though I go to Minneapolis all the time, I couldn't get my characters to cross the river even once.

## Minnesota Book Award Categories:

Children's Literature  
General Nonfiction  
Genre Fiction  
Memoir & Creative Nonfiction  
Minnesota Novel & Short Story  
Poetry  
Young People's Literature

  
**THE FRIENDS OF THE SAINT PAUL PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
325 Cedar Street  
Suite 555  
Saint Paul, MN 55101  
651-222-3242  
[www.thefriends.org](http://www.thefriends.org)

A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by The Minnesota Book Awards & The Friends of The Saint Paul Public Library

23RD ANNUAL

# MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

**Novel & Short Story Winner**

*Sponsored by Anchor Trust*



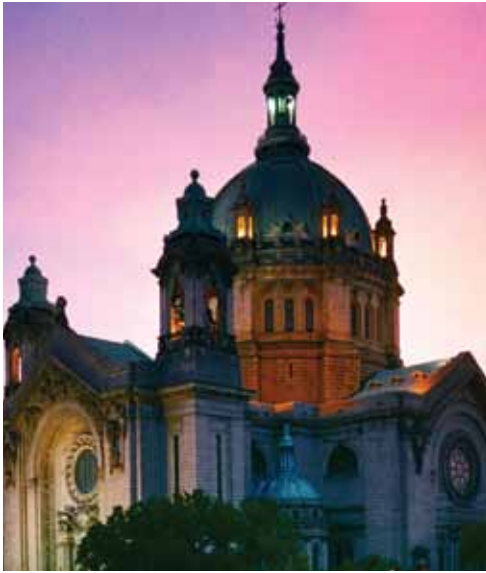
***Vestments***  
by John Reimringer

MILKWEED EDITIONS

# Vestments

## SUMMARY

Originally drawn to the priesthood by the mystery, purity, and sensual fabric of the Catholic Church, as well as by its promise of a safe harbor from his violent father, James Dressler finds himself—just a few years after his ordination—drawn again to his first love, Betty Garcia. Torn between these competing loves, and haunted by his heritage, James finds himself at a crossroads.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. What do you think of Joe Dressler? Is he a sympathetic character?
3. Why does Betty García make the choices she does? What role does her uncle, Hank Ramirez, play in her life?
4. Do any of Hank's actions surprise you? What are his motivations?
5. What is Otto Dressler's relationship with his son, Joe? How does it differ from his relationship with his grandson James?
6. What attracts James Dressler to the priesthood? Does he seem like a good priest?
7. How do the priests in the book differ from or meet your expectations?
8. Why do you think James makes the choices he does regarding his father and Betty in the end?
9. In what ways is the city of Saint Paul a character in this book? Could you also say that the Catholic Church is a character in the book?
10. What does the book say about men's relationships with one another?



## ABOUT JOHN REIMRINGER

*Born in Fargo, North Dakota, and raised in Topeka, Kansas, John Reimringer has a BS in journalism from the University of Kansas and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Arkansas. He has worked for the Santa Fe Railroad; as a newspaper editor in Kansas; as a youth hostel night porter in Edinburgh, Scotland; for the University of Iowa Law Library; and in the University of Kansas public relations office. He currently teaches English at Normandale Community College and lives in Saint Paul with his wife, the poet Katrina Vandenberg. Vestments is his first novel, and it was named by Publisher's Weekly as one of the "Best Books of 2010."*

*Learn more about the author and his work at [www.johnreimringer.com](http://www.johnreimringer.com).*



Photo by James Peters



The 23rd annual Minnesota Book Awards is a project of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library, with the Saint Paul Public Library and the City of Saint Paul. Presenting sponsor: RBC Wealth Management. The Book Awards is supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency that fosters innovation, leadership and a lifetime of learning; and the Minnesota Department of Education/State Library Agency, with funding under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA).

The 23rd annual Minnesota Book Awards is also supported by: Beaver's Pond Press; Capstone; Coffee House Press; Common Good Books; Graywolf Press; HarperCollins Publishers; Lerner Publishing Group; The Loft Literary Center; McGrann Shea Carnival Straughn & Lamb, Chartered; Metropolitan

Library Service Agency (MELSA); Milkweed Editions; Minnesota Center for Book Arts; Minnesota Educational Media Organization; Minnesota Historical Society Press; Minnesota Library Foundation; MLBA Children's Fund; MS&R; The Red Balloon Bookshop; *Saint Paul Almanac*; University of Minnesota Press; and Voyageur Press/MVP Books. Media sponsors include Minnesota Public Radio; the *Pioneer Press* and *TwinCities.com*; Saint Paul Neighborhood Network (SPNN); and TPT-Minnesota Channel. Generous support for the Book Awards has been provided by The Boss Foundation; City of Saint Paul Cultural STAR Program; Harlan Boss Foundation for the Arts; The Huss Foundation; and the Katherine B. Andersen Fund of The Saint Paul Foundation.

# 23RD ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS