The Outtakes of a Literary Life

Douglas Cumming

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol54/iss4/4

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines. For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.
The Outtakes of a Literary Life

Recalling the journalistic career of Marshall Frady — and how Furman almost became the keeper of his personal papers.

By Douglas Cumming

It seems fitting that the 58 acid-free boxes of the personal papers of Marshall Frady should be secured now in one of the South’s finest collections of literary archives. The restless, romantic son of a Southern Baptist preacher, Frady always aspired to a kind of literary transcendence. And to many admirers, he had the gift to achieve it.

At Furman from 1959 until graduating in 1963, he graced student publications — especially the newspaper and the Echo, the literary magazine — with writing already marked by a well-disciplined, high prose style. Later, his ambition ramifying in the big-name magazines of New Journalism, Frady described his vision of writers blending in among ordinary citizens but “covertly . . . sending dispatches from those far brawlings of life to Dickens, Twain, Gogol, Balzac, Cervantes, and all those others you got to know a long time ago. . . .” He was driven by what Shakespeare meant in saying neither marble nor gilded monuments endure like written words that are read centuries later.

So Frady might be pleased that his papers are safely stored on the top floor of the Woodruff Library at Emory University, where the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library (cleverly called MARBL) is perched inside a high foursquare panorama of Atlanta, his home for 15 years. Here, too, are the papers of some of the South’s best-known journalists, including Henry Grady and Ralph McGill. Here also are the papers of such immortals as Flannery O’Connor, Joel Chandler Harris, Margaret Mitchell and James Dickey.

Like a temple to that ideal of literature that lasts, it has the busts of poets lining one wall, sternly watching scholars quietly leaf through their private scribblings: W.H. Auden, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes and others.
Recalling the journalistic career of Marshall Frady — and how Furman almost became the keeper of his personal papers.

By Douglas Cumming
There was always a lot more to Frady, of course, than the Who’s Who version. The stories about him from fellow writers, as well as his own told tales of endless nomadic journalistic quests, have left a bare of legend around his memory. Just after Frady's death, Marc Cooper wrote in The Nation of how the two of them had been stranded in Mexico City for 57 days waiting permission, in vain, for a reporting trip to Cuba. One morning Cooper was astonished to find that Frady had spent all night typing and crumpling pages, asked by stimulants and Scotch, until he had achieved the perfect one-page book proposal. "I simply couldn't believe," wrote Cooper, "that anyone could take so long to so meticulously craft two paragraphs and that, in turn, so few words could say so much."

This picture of Frady seems at odds with the figure others recall, soberly typing out a baroque prose that detailed word-count editing and achieved almost first-draft eloquence. He talked that way too, recalled Harper's colleague David Halberstam in an introduction to a re-issue of Billy Graham in 2006. "I sometimes thought I could almost see the process take place — Marshall deciding what it was he wanted to say and rooting it through that part of his brain where, I think, his other literary heroes lurked, and then in time it came out, exceptionally full, as if smeared in the nineteenth century rather than the twentieth, ready, I sometimes thought, to be set in type and printed in granite."

Like many artists smitten with an inconsiderate muse, Frady was fond of the debts that seemed to multiply the wake of his writer’s drive and romantic impulses. Harper's editor Willie Morris once wrote of how Frady had indulged an obsession with the singer actress Hedy Lamarr since seeing her on screen when he was a boy of 9. This bewitchment, Frady told Morris, had "propelled him over the years into a number of romantic misadventures in pursuit of her memory, including possibly even one marriage."

Frady eventually had four marriages, three divorces, and children, and as many creditors as editors. The Emory archives include a personal financial profile from the early 1970s. It lists an income of $64,000 based on a promise to produce eight articles a year for various magazines, and among the debts, $2,000 for a mortgage, $3,000 for a non-transferable, no-schedule loan from Morris, $2,160 a year in alimony, and bills from Sears and Rich's for $450.

The life of Marshall Bolton Frady can be expressed as the non-journalism encyclopedia he is, in the glancing recollection of his high-selling career. With a B.A. degree from Furman, he worked briefly in the Atlanta bureau of the Morris Newsprint chain, then in 1964 joined Newsweek as a correspondent covering the Deep South at the height of the civil rights movement. A year later he accepted a fellowship to study at the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop, famed as a colony of post-baccalaureate and serious novelists.

After another spell at Newsweek, he left again to write a biography of Alabama's erstwhile governor, George Wallace, who was then in his first run for president. The 1968 publication of this nonfiction portrait of Wallace, described later in typically Fradyesque words as "a stubby, charmingly combative segregationist and hoity-gloity dyke mannerism," made the author a literary — and controversial — sensation at age 28. (On a 1991 letter in the Frady papers, Emory historian Dan T. Carter, who was then working on a biography of Wallace, wrote to Frady: "If the risk of shameless flattery, I have to say that there is no-one who has come closer to explain Wallace than you did: ..."

Frady became a staff writer for The Saturday Evening Post, a writer on contract with Life magazine, and a contributing editor of Harper's, all the while freelancing for such magazines as Mademoiselle, Esquire, The New York Review of Books, New Times and Atlantic. Two more nonfiction books capped this phase of his career: Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness (Little, Brown, 1979) and Southerners: A Journalist's Odyssey (New American Library, 1983).

Next, Frady decamped for Manhattan to become the chief writer for the ABC News show "Closeup" and a correspondent for "Nightline."

With several awards for his television documentaries, but a Southern writer's pang of displacement, he left for California in 1986 to try the larger artistic frame of screenplays. His archives contain hefty movie projects and records of lucrative contracts — among them an update of All the King's Men, a fictionalized take on Che Guevara, and a movie version of John M. Barry's Rising Tides.

In the 1990s Frady returned to magazine reporting as a staff writer for The New Yorker. Two more biographies of historical Southerners followed: Jesse: The Life and Legacy of Jesse Jackson (Random House, 1996) and, fulfilling a long-standing goal in 216 small pages, Martin Luther King Jr. (Fsgenius Life series, 2002).
Frady's papers are in some ways more impressive than those of the better known names at MARBL. The Marshall Frady boxes contain 52 linear feet of well-crafted typed and handwritten letters, self-edited drafts, clipping files, reporter's notes in a speed-slanted but clear hand, and staggeringly plump manuscripts, some of them screens, plays never written and fiction never published. These outsiders of Frady's life as a writer are certainly worthy of the company they keep. Frady's mental collide in a cemetery in North Augusta, S.C., near where he was born in 1940. His death by cancer on March 9, 2004, at age 64, came so unexpectedly as to seem plausibly drafted and shuffled. Frady himself, in a letter dated March 10, 2004, described the process. "I have to say that in no-one has come closer to explaining Wallace than you did..."

Frady became a staff writer for The Saturday Evening Post, a writer on contract with Life magazine, and a contributing editor of Harper's, all the while freelancing for such magazines as Mademoiselle, Esquire, The New York Review of Books, New Times and Atlantic. Two more nonfiction books capped this phase of his career: Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness (Little, Brown, 1979) and Southerners: A Journalist's Odyssey (New American Library, 1983).

Next, Frady decamped for Manhattan to become the chief writer for the ABC News show "Closeup" and a correspondent for "Nightline." With several awards for his television documentaries, but a Southern writer's pang of displacement, he left for California in 1986 to try the larger artistic frame of screenplays. His archives contain hefty movie projects and records of lucrative contracts — among them an update of the classic novel of the 1930s, and a fictionalized take on Che Guevara, and a movie version of John M. Barry's Rising Tide. In the 1990s Frady returned to magazine reporting as a staff writer for The New Yorker. Two more biographies of historical Southerners followed: Jesse: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson (Random House, 1996) and, fulfilling a career-long goal in 216 small pages, Martin Luther King, Jr. (Fsgmeier Life series, 2005).

There was always a lot more to Frady, of course, than the Who's Who version. The stories about him from fellow writers, as well as his own raved tales of endless nomadic journalistic quests, have left a bare or legend around his memory. Just ask Frady's wife, Barbara, who had newly arrived as a stranger, and a young kinsman whom she found itself ministering to the grief of a widow. Perhaps the most impressive than those of the better known names at MARBL. The Marshall Frady boxes contain 52 linear feet of well-crafted typed and handwritten letters, self-edited drafts, clipping files, reporter's notes in a speed-slanted but clear hand, and staggeringly plump manuscripts, some of them screens, plays never written and fiction never published. These outsiders of Frady's life as a writer are certainly worthy of the company they keep. Frady's mental collide in a cemetery in North Augusta, S.C., near where he was born in 1940. His death by cancer on March 9, 2004, at age 64, came so unexpectedly as to seem plausibly drafted and shuffled. Frady himself, in a letter dated March 10, 2004, described the process. "I have to say that in no-one has come closer to explaining Wallace than you did..."

Frady became a staff writer for The Saturday Evening Post, a writer on contract with Life magazine, and a contributing editor of Harper's, all the while freelancing for such magazines as Mademoiselle, Esquire, The New York Review of Books, New Times and Atlantic. Two more nonfiction books capped this phase of his career: Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness (Little, Brown, 1979) and Southerners: A Journalist's Odyssey (New American Library, 1983).

Next, Frady decamped for Manhattan to become the chief writer for the ABC News show "Closeup" and a correspondent for "Nightline." With several awards for his television documentaries, but a Southern writer's pang of displacement, he left for California in 1986 to try the larger artistic frame of screenplays. His archives contain hefty movie projects and records of lucrative contracts — among them an update of the classic novel of the 1930s, and a fictionalized take on Che Guevara, and a movie version of John M. Barry's Rising Tide. In the 1990s Frady returned to magazine reporting as a staff writer for The New Yorker. Two more biographies of historical Southerners followed: Jesse: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson (Random House, 1996) and, fulfilling a career-long goal in 216 small pages, Martin Luther King, Jr. (Fsgmeier Life series, 2005).

There was always a lot more to Frady, of course, than the Who's Who version. The stories about him from fellow writers, as well as his own raved tales of endless nomadic journalistic quests, have left a bare or legend around his memory. Just ask Frady's wife, Barbara, who had newly arrived as a stranger, and a young kinsman whom she found itself ministering to the grief of a widow. Perhaps the most
Still learning from Marshall

Dawdling through my high school years in the leafy refuge of north Atlanta, I was almost oblivious to the upheavals ringing around me, “the Sixties.” Luckily, my father, Joe Cumming, happened to be the Atlanta bureau chief of Newsweek, and in that post became sort of a.tabs of “the race beat” comprised of all those great reporters, editors and national television news correspondents who covered the events. He was the best arrangement she could.

The author, a longtime newspaper reporter and editor, is a professor of journalism and mass communications at Washington & Lee University in Lexington, Va.

The process, I admit, involved a touch of burglary. It was a family secret for my father and me that some of our favorite words and metaphors we stole from Marshall. When I wrote about Atlanta’s missing and murdered children, one April, I described the description blooming in the woods “like puffs of musketry.” Shameless thievery. And then there’s that great image he had for the way a man or a fellow fox trod Southern Baptist, galumphing behind him throughout life like a great whizzing cellophane.

At some of Garfield’s papers, he wrote, “I feel thoroughly jackhammered and finally getting an overdue book editor in New York who was utterly devoted to the upheavals ringing around me, “the Sixties.” Luckily, my father, Joe Cumming, happened to be the Atlanta bureau chief of Newsweek, and in that post became sort of a.tabs of “the race beat” comprised of all those great reporters, editors and national television news correspondents who covered the events. He was the best arrangement she could.

The author, a longtime newspaper reporter and editor, is a professor of journalism and mass communications at Washington & Lee University in Lexington, Va.

The process, I admit, involved a touch of burglary. It was a family secret for my father and me that some of our favorite words and metaphors we stole from Marshall. When I wrote about Atlanta’s missing and murdered children, one April, I described the description blooming in the woods “like puffs of musketry.” Shameless thievery. And then there’s that great image he had for the way a man or a fellow fox trod Southern Baptist, galumphing behind him throughout life like a great whizzing cellophane.
Over the next few years, the papers sat in the Furman archives, but researchers could not get at them because Barbara Gandolfo-Frady had not formally donated them. She was, in fact, unskilled on the matter. As a film production professional, she was struggling to find work while living in Greenville, where Furman had allowed her and her young charge to remain in a house near the campus. She was in discussions with Emory, knowing that placing the papers there would draw more researchers and give them a higher profile.

In the midst of this indecision, the IRS swooped in and seized the papers, the only house near the campus. She was in discussions allowed her and her young charge to remain in

The IRS, not known as a particularly nimble agency, had failed to generate any additional interest in the papers. So the deal was quickly consummated in a windowless, 12-by-18-foot IRS office in midtown Manhattan, as described in The New York Times:

Enniss was the only bidder present; Furman had sent in bidding instructions that were conveyed by an IRS functionary. The bidding rose from $6,000 to what Furman had set as its maximum: $15,000. Enniss recalled that he then put in the winning bid — $10,000 — at the increment suggested by the IRS agent conducting the sale.

The rushed, denatured character of the transaction, not the thought of the remaining tax liability, left Gandolfo-Frady distraught. She was fighting back tears, according to the Times. But she took solace in knowing that Furman had not forgotten Frady. “It was nice to know they were still interested,” she said in the Times article. And she was quoted as saying she was relieved that the papers would be in a place where researchers, students and journalists could take in the whole of Frady’s work.

“Frady was in one of hundreds of unpublished treasures waiting to be discovered, “the English language, at its most alive, is inexhaustibly volatile and versatile, omnivorously assimilating, infinitely moving after meaning with a kind of controlled recklessness like a wolf-pack after deer.”

Tom Knox, provost and executive vice president at Furman in 2009, and the university was far more saddened by Frady’s death than by losing the papers. “We never assumed the papers would end up at Furman,” Knox e-mailed from the University of Evansville, where he is now president. “We hoped that they would, but understood that Barbara would likely see the best arrangement she could.”

So one of Furman’s contributions to the world is its role in shaping the talent of Marshall Frady. That gift of Furman’s — of Frady’s — is now scattered on the slow broad sea of time, of an older South he evoked from my childhood in Augusta.

I once saw Marshall in the morose, the newspaper’s library of old clippings. He was poring over articles on Billy Graham. Years later, when I was at the newspaper in Providence, R.I., he sent me a tip he had gotten at ABC- TV’s “Closeup” in New York, about a hallowed-in-my-territory that could possible be the primitive Black Islands main water supply. A few years later, his authoritative list of recommendation, I’m convinced, was the pennyweight that tipped the scale to win for me a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard.

One of the correspondents was a particularly burning younger man, my father, Marshall, Frady, Marshall looked like that losses-known fourth member of the Mamas and the Papas, Denny something, but when he told stories over drinks on our screened porch, it was better than listening to the Mamas and the Papas, or even the Beatles. He picked his words with a kind of tropically fluid, his eyes darting and dancing, and delivered them in the timbre of an older South he evoked from my childhood in Augusta. Marshall Frady was born 11 years earlier than I in that same city but “on the other side of the tracks,” was becoming a lifelong inspiration to me.

It was not so much that he brought to our warm, noisy home his witness from the “windy margins of life,” as he might say. His influence on me was more shamanistic, the incantations that turned life into literature, and literature into life.

I once saw Marshall in the morose, the newspaper’s library of old clippings. He was poring over articles on Billy Graham. Years later, when I was at the newspaper in Providence, R.I., he sent me a tip he had gotten at ABC- TV’s “Closeup” in New York, about a hallowed-in-my-territory that could possible be the primitive Black Islands main water supply. A few years later, his authoritative list of recommendation, I’m convinced, was the pennyweight that tipped the scale to win for me a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard.

One of the correspondents was a particularly burning younger man, my father, Marshall, Frady, Marshall looked like that losses-known fourth member of the Mamas and the Papas, Denny something, but when he told stories over drinks on our screened porch, it was better than listening to the Mamas and the Papas, or even the Beatles. He picked his words with a kind of tropically fluid, his eyes darting and dancing, and delivered them in the timbre of an older South he evoked from my childhood in Augusta. Marshall Frady was born 11 years earlier than I in that same city but “on the other side of the tracks,” was becoming a lifelong inspiration to me.

I once saw Marshall in the morose, the newspaper’s library of old clippings. He was poring over articles on Billy Graham. Years later, when I was at the newspaper in Providence, R.I., he sent me a tip he had gotten at ABC- TV’s “Closeup” in New York, about a hallowed-in-my-territory that could possible be the primitive Black Islands main water supply. A few years later, his authoritative list of recommendation, I’m convinced, was the pennyweight that tipped the scale to win for me a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard.

One of the correspondents was a particularly burning younger man, my father, Marshall, Frady, Marshall looked like that losses-known fourth member of the Mamas and the Papas, Denny something, but when he told stories over drinks on our screened porch, it was better than listening to the Mamas and the Papas, or even the Beatles. He picked his words with a kind of tropically fluid, his eyes darting and dancing, and delivered them in the timbre of an older South he evoked from my childhood in Augusta. Marshall Frady was born 11 years earlier than I in that same city but “on the other side of the tracks,” was becoming a lifelong inspiration to me.

I once saw Marshall in the morose, the newspaper’s library of old clippings. He was poring over articles on Billy Graham. Years later, when I was at the newspaper in Providence, R.I., he sent me a tip he had gotten at ABC- TV’s “Closeup” in New York, about a hallowed-in-my-territory that could possible be the primitive Black Islands main water supply. A few years later, his authoritative list of recommendation, I’m convinced, was the pennyweight that tipped the scale to win for me a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard.

One of the correspondents was a particularly burning younger man, my father, Marshall, Frady, Marshall looked like that losses-known fourth member of the Mamas and the Papas, Denny something, but when he told stories over drinks on our screened porch, it was better than listening to the Mamas and the Papas, or even the Beatles. He picked his words with a kind of tropically fluid, his eyes darting and dancing, and delivered them in the timbre of an older South he evoked from my childhood in Augusta. Marshall Frady was born 11 years earlier than I in that same city but “on the other side of the tracks,” was becoming a lifelong inspiration to me.

I once saw Marshall in the morose, the newspaper’s library of old clippings. He was poring over articles on Billy Graham. Years later, when I was at the newspaper in Providence, R.I., he sent me a tip he had gotten at ABC- TV’s “Closeup” in New York, about a hallowed-in-my-territory that could possible be the primitive Black Islands main water supply. A few years later, his authoritative list of recommendation, I’m convinced, was the pennyweight that tipped the scale to win for me a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard.

One of the correspondents was a particularly burning younger man, my father, Marshall, Frady, Marshall looked like that losses-known fourth member of the Mamas and the Papas, Denny something, but when he told stories over drinks on our screened porch, it was better than listening to the Mamas and the Papas, or even the Beatles. He picked his words with a kind of tropically fluid, his eyes darting and dancing, and delivered them in the timbre of an older South he evoked from my childhood in Augusta. Marshall Frady was born 11 years earlier than I in that same city but “on the other side of the tracks,” was becoming a lifelong inspiration to me.

I once saw Marshall in the morose, the newspaper’s library of old clippings. He was poring over articles on Billy Graham. Years later, when I was at the newspaper in Providence, R.I., he sent me a tip he had gotten at ABC- TV’s “Closeup” in New York, about a hallowed-in-my-territory that could possible be the primitive Black Islands main water supply. A few years later, his authoritative list of recommendation, I’m convinced, was the pennyweight that tipped the scale to win for me a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard.

One of the correspondents was a particularly burning younger man, my father, Marshall, Frady, Marshall looked like that losses-known fourth member of the Mamas and the Papas, Denny something, but when he told stories over drinks on our screened porch, it was better than listening to the Mamas and the Papas, or even the Beatles. He picked his words with a kind of tropically fluid, his eyes darting and dancing, and delivered them in the timbre of an older South he evoked from my childhood in Augusta. Marshall Frady was born 11 years earlier than I in that same city but “on the other side of the tracks,” was becoming a lifelong inspiration to me.