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The Power of One

JESSE

The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson

By *Marshall Frady*

Random House. 552 pp. \$28.50

Reviewed by **Jim Sleeper**

“I am—somebody!” People the world over have shouted these words along with Jesse Jackson, making him somebody, indeed. But who is he, really? That so enigmatic a man became heir by default to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s foundering movement makes it important to know more about him. But it also raises questions about a strain of romantic moralism in our politics that periodically inflames, then depletes, black and liberal movements as well as fundamentalist ones. Marshall Frady has written this hagiography as a romantic moralist: “Absent the great moral dramaturgy of King’s day,” he laments, “Jackson was left to struggle in the vague-spiritual flats of a more prosaic and middling season to find his apotheosis, his mountaintop.” On nearly every page, you can feel both subject and author yearning for that mountaintop; the book seems as much Frady’s pilgrimage as Jackson’s, muddling our reckoning with the man and his “Rainbow.”

Frady grew up near Jackson’s native Greenville, S.C., and attended the white Furman College near Jackson’s house in the late 1950s. He didn’t meet Jackson until the late 1960s, as a Newsweek reporter, and only later still did he learn that Jackson had watched Furman football games from a black seating area that Frady and classmates had called the “crow’s section.” Not surprisingly, this Baptist minister’s son and biographer of George Wallace brings to Jackson’s story a Southern liberal’s peculiar moral urgency and strained intimacy; he appreciates much but perhaps atones for too much.

In powerful chapters on Jackson’s early life, Frady shows that his birth to a teenaged mother, after “a feverish liaison with a married man in his mid-thirties,” took place in a black community that was otherwise still so deeply churched that its strong moral censure was inseparable from the strong social bonds that help a village to raise a child. With Jackson’s shame (“You ain’t nothin’ but a nobody,” children taunted) came a hunger to prove himself to watchful teachers and preachers who gave



BY HARRY PINCUS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

his talents the moral traction of a clear path toward redemption, a path from which he strays but to which, in Frady’s view, he always returns.

It is too easy for Jackson’s critics to condemn his foibles and discount his invocations of soul power to free hostages; to “preach the riot out of a crowd” bent on destruction, as he did during the collapse of Resurrection City in 1968 and, 20 years later, to angry blacks ready to invade the Democrats’ Atlanta convention; to preach self-discipline and “conservative” social values compellingly to youths even more lost than he was; and to unite white and black voters as none of the other insurgent presidential candidates since Robert Kennedy has done, setting black electoral precedents that, ironically, strengthened Colin Powell’s presidential plausibility.

But it’s also too easy to swoon over Frady’s misty-eyed, mediagenic accounts of Jackson as pilgrim and prophet. Wives of struggling white farmers weep in his arms. Armenian earthquake survivors embrace the man CNN has made a herald of their freedom (and of America’s moral greatness). Tribal “kings,” tinpot dictators and Soviet apparatchiks squirm, sometimes melt, at his importunings. But they all become props on Jackson’s noisy stage, and Frady’s accounts of such encounters implausibly give Jackson the last word before every change of scene. He omits too many occa-

sions—like the slaying of a black teenager by a white cop in New Jersey and a California Board of Regents’ meeting on affirmative action—when Jackson dropped in and held forth without knowing what he was talking about.

It’s telling that Frady omits Harold Washington’s strenuous effort, while grinning through gritted teeth on the night of his victory as mayor of Chicago, to keep Jackson from lifting both their arms high, like a boxing promoter heralding “his” fighter. Gary Rivlin’s nuanced “Fire on the Prairie” describes this and others of Jackson’s failures to sustain movement-building “on the ground” in Chicago, including his bunglings of the Breadbasket, Black Expo, and PUSH programs; Frady dashes through all this but dotes on symbolic trips like one to Angola that reappears several times in the book.

FRADY DOES ARGUE THAT JACKSON’S strong showings in the 1984 and 1988 presidential primaries “startled all the given political wisdoms” with “an assertive black political force that could no longer be presumed to be a Democratic property free of any real expense.” But he doesn’t reckon fully with the reality that Bill Clinton became the first Democrat to win the presidency, with overwhelming black support, after repudiating Jackson and his vague agendas. His claim that “Jackson undertook to

fashion . . . a true, omnibus, populist mass coalition" misses or fudges the difference between televised rallies and real movement-building, between winning primaries and assembling a governing majority or plurality in a general election.

Does Frady ever show Jackson sinning? Sure, as John Bunyan shows Christian in "The Pilgrim's Progress," that Ur-text of moral heroes eager to recount their seductions by Mr. Worldly-Wiseman and Vanity Fair. Jackson's egotism, obdurate resentments and financial finaglings appear amid ritual sighing and "spin doctoring" by Richard Hatcher, Herbert Daughtry, Andrew Young, Roger Wilkins, Robert Borosage, and Jackson's wife, Jackie, whose folksy, stagey apologetics Frady swallows whole. He even concludes the famous story of how Jackson smeared his shirt with King's blood and claimed he'd held the dying martyr, by observing that "at least the symbolism of Jackson's story—a transfer of the commission, signified by a kind of anointing with King's very blood—would turn out to be largely the reality."

What is reality? In a politics of moral posturing, getting real is less important than being heard: "If you're a human being and weren't affected by what you just heard, you may be beyond redemption," Frady reports Florida Gov. Bob Graham saying after Jackson's magnificent address at the 1984 Democratic convention, which "some commentators" thought "the greatest oration delivered at a presidential nominating convention since William Jennings Bryan's in 1896." But, as Mario Cuomo's eloquence at the same 1984 convention might have taught us, oratory isn't action; a pilgrimage isn't politics.

A new progressive politics should grasp another truth that Frady softpedals: Jackson's big vote in some heavily white areas shows a country less racist than it has been; he has gotten a lot of mileage out of whites' own guilt and goodwill, with this book a case in point. Racism remains, but Jackson's ascent was thwarted less by color than by more intimate hurts and flaws; Harold Washington, Colin Powell and other leaders were born black and poor, too, but not hungry. Their moral journey is the one Jackson's own teachers and preachers envisioned for him, and the one Frady's romanticism obscures. ■

Jim Sleeper, author of "The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York," is writing a new book about race.

MONDAY, AUGUST 12, 1996

Media Notes

Post Book Review Gets Unwelcome 2nd Printing

By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer

You know you're in journalistic trouble when your best defense is: "We are both guilty of an incredibly tangled and embarrassing series of blunders."

That's the way Patricia Holt, editor of the San Francisco Chronicle's Book Review, explains how two-thirds of a review in her paper came to be lifted, almost verbatim, from The Washington Post's Book World.

Pleading incompetence, in this case, beats the alternative.

"I'm not stupid," says Dean Wakefield, the Chronicle's opinion editor and author of the review in question. "I would certainly not plagiarize someone's work. That's just beyond the pale. . . . It was an honest mistake."

The incident that led to an apology and two corrections by the Chronicle began on June 2, when The Post published a review of Marshall Frady's biography of Jesse Jackson. The au-

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A Messy Review of 'Jesse'

MEDIA NOTES, From D1

thor was New York writer Jim Sleeper.

Soon afterward, Wakefield, who had little experience reviewing books, was asked to review "Jesse" for his paper. He says he downloaded Sleeper's review to his computer to study it. This was a "mistake," Holt wrote in her letter of apology to Sleeper, "but I later compounded the problem with my own mistake." Holt says she grabbed what she thought was Wakefield's review—Sleeper's byline had somehow been deleted—from his private computer file and began reading it.

"The Keystone Kops routine was just starting. Wakefield, returning from an out-of-town trip, says he got a message from Holt asking for the review and filed the piece: his own. Holt says she found this "not as strong" as what she believed to be his first draft, so she combined them. When the Sleeperized review was laid out on the cover of the June 30 book review, Wakefield says, he read the top, saw his own words and didn't bother to turn the page—to the 12 paragraphs of Sleeper's language, right through to the last sentence.

Holt calls the episode her "worst nightmare . . . we're just feeling terrible for what we did to Sleeper and The Post."

Wakefield says he didn't agree with Sleeper's criticisms of "Jesse" that were published under his name. "I'm just totally devastated by this whole thing," he says.

Sleeper, for his part, remains

skeptical. "While I don't have any reason to presume plagiarism," he says, "there's a level of incompetence and dereliction here that's unbelievable."

From Salon
DON'T TOUCH THAT FILE

When writers are accused of plagiarism these days, they often plead innocent on the grounds of an electronic mishap: A file of their own notes was inadvertently confused with a file of notes taken from other sources.

In one unusual recent case, however, an editor at the San Francisco Chronicle Book Review has admitted she may have caused an incidence of plagiarism by rifling through her writer's personal computer files and printing parts of the wrong review.

It took an alert reader in Pacific Grove, CA to notice the similarities between Chronicle op-ed editor Dean Wakefield's June 30 review of Marshall Frady's new biography of Jesse Jackson, titled "Jesse," and a review of the book by the political writer Jim Sleeper that had run several weeks earlier in The Washington Post Book World.

Both reviews were cover stories for their respective Sunday book reviews, and at first glance they seem utterly different. But once you read past the first few paragraphs of Wakefield's review, the similarities to Sleeper's June 2nd Washington Post review become apparent. The middle and final sections of Wakefield's review contain more than ten paragraphs that are lifted nearly verbatim from Sleeper's earlier essay.

To give one example, here is a sentence from the final paragraph of Sleeper's original review:

"A new progressive politics should grasp another truth that Frady softpedals: Jackson's big vote in some heavily white areas shows a country less racist than it has been; he has gotten a lot of mileage out of whites' own guilt and goodwill, with his book a case in point."

Here is a sentence from Wakefield's later review:

"Still, a new progressive politics should grasp an irony Frady soft-pedals: Jackson's big vote in some heavily white areas shows a country less racist than it has been. He has gotten a lot of mileage out of whites' own guilt and goodwill, and this book is a case in point."

According to Wakefield, the resemblance between the two reviews is a case of "electronic error." While working on his review of "Jesse," he says, he called up a copy of Sleeper's earlier review and downloaded it into his files in order to read it and "make sure I was doing justice to Frady's book." Wakefield, who recently came to the Chronicle from the editorial pages of the Los Angeles Times, says he had not reviewed many books in the past and wanted to read Sleeper's review more for form than content, "just to see how good reviews are done."

Wakefield says he did write and submit an entirely original review of Frady's book, but that Sleeper's words were mingled with his own in the editing process. Patricia Holt, the Chronicle's book review editor, did not return telephone calls last week. But in a letter faxed to Sleeper, which he made available to Salon, Holt wrote that she and Wakefield "are both guilty of an incredibly tangled and embarrassing series of blunders that resulted in the sabotage of our own review process." She also notes that "in my 14 years as Book Editor, nothing like this has ever happened."

According to Holt's rambling, three and one-half page letter, the error occurred when she became worried that Wakefield -- who was apparently out of town -- would miss his deadline on the review. "I kept looking in our data base for his review and, when the keyword 'Jesse' came up on my screen, nabbed what I thought was Dean's review," Holt wrote Sleeper. Unfortunately,