

MARCH 13, 2012

by BY ERIC JOHNSON

For a long time, James Reston, Jr. '63 resisted the idea of becoming a writer. As the son of famed New York Times editor and columnist James "Scotty" Reston, the younger Reston wasn't interested in making journalism a family business.

"Certainly, through my first couple of years at Chapel Hill, I rejected all of that," Reston recalled during an interview at his home in Chevy Chase, Maryland. "I didn't want to go in that direction at all."

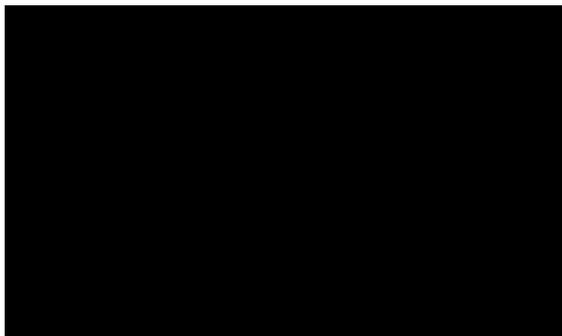
It wasn't until his junior year, studying abroad at Oxford, that he began to reconsider. Writing and defending two essays each week for his Oxford tutors, he found that the work suited him well.

After graduation, he served as a speechwriter for Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, followed by a

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stint writing political essays for the Chicago Daily News. During the Vietnam War, Reston volunteered to serve in in a U.S. Army intelligence unit, which afforded him the time to write his first novel. *To Defend, To Destroy* was published in 1971.

"I was stationed in Hawaii, and on weekends I would fly off to outer islands and hole myself up in hotel rooms and try to write," he said. "That's how I got into the writing business." Fifteen books later, he's still very much in the writing business, though he now holes up in a cozy home office decorated with framed covers and illustrations from his books.



*The manuscript of Reston's latest novel—with edits penciled in the margins—sits atop his coffee table.*



*Reston on the front porch of his home in Chevy Chase, Maryland, just outside of Washington, DC.*

Reston found his calling in nonfiction, and he has written on an eclectic range of topics—an exploration of cult leader Jim Jones, a celebrated biography of Galileo, a memoir of his experience raising his daughter Hillary, who suffers from a severe neurological disorder.

He is most widely known for his role in the 1977 interviews between British journalist David Frost and former president Richard Nixon. Reston served as the lead researcher for Frost, uncovering new material about the Watergate scandal and helping turn the interviews into a legendary moment in political history.

Reston chronicled the experience in *The Conviction of Richard Nixon: The Untold Story of the Frost/Nixon Interviews*, and he served as a consultant to the Broadway play *Frost/Nixon* and the 2008 film adaptation. “What a trip that was!” Reston said, referring to his work on the film.

In recent years, he has made a name for himself in the policy world by connecting his histories of the Crusades to current events. With titles like *Warriors of God*, *Dogs of God*, and *Defenders of the Faith*, his books on conflict between Muslim and Christian civilizations made him a sought-after commentator on American policy after September 11th, 2001.

For his latest project, Reston decided to tackle some of those same themes in fiction. He has spent the past few years writing *The Nineteenth Hijacker*, an imagined account of September 11th and his first novel in more than three decades. It will be published in Spring 2021.

“It’s a real roll of the dice for me,” Reston says. “I’ve done it without a contract, something I haven’t done since 1974. But it’s something I really wanted to do.”

In his first interview about the book, Reston explains what drew him to such sensitive territory and why he finds value in crafting a narrative from tragedy.

**The Scholar:** You’ve described your literary career as a series of obsessions, where you spend years becoming immersed in a particular subject. How did 9/11 become one of those obsessions?

**Jim:** I’m a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center here in Washington, and that was run until recently by the co-chair of the 9/11 Commission, Lee Hamilton. Lee is a wonderful man—a bit of a raconteur—and I filmed a conversation with him a few years ago about 9/11.

He mentioned that the 9/11 Commission never had the time—or possibly the inclination—to look into the individual lives of the 19 hijackers. There was one in particular that really interested him, and my ears perked up at this.

The hijacker he was talking about was the Lebanese man who took the plane down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania—flight 93. His name was Ziad al-Jarrah.

**TS:** Why the focus on him? Why not the other eighteen?

**Jim:** He was particularly interesting, and in many ways separate from all of the others. He was Lebanese, he came from a very fine family in Beirut and was close to his family even to the very end. He also had a very deep romantic relationship with a woman in Germany, and that kind of thing was very much against al-Qaeda rules.

Perhaps most interestingly, he almost pulled out of the operation in July of 2001.

**TS:** That does sound like a solid premise for a book.

**Jim:** As an author, the idea of a choice between strong family ties and a strong romantic relationship or this sense of conviction about a larger cause appealed to me immensely. I thought, “Well, that’s a good subject for me, and I’ll do it as non-fiction.” Then I come to find out that much of the material surrounding the 9/11 hijackers is still classified. So it just couldn’t be

done in any other way but to imagine it.

**TS:** Are you concerned about negative reactions to fictionalizing 9/11? The critical reaction to other novels that have touched on 9/11 has been decidedly mixed.

**Jim:** From an author's standpoint, I think you've got to get beyond the big event before people really want to open their mind up to it. When I published my first novel in 1971, the Vietnam War was not over. And in some ways, I think that book was published too soon.

Now, with 9/11, the situation seems to have turned around with the death of Osama bin Laden. It's as if we've won it now. We've brought it some kind of closure . . . I hope.

**TS:** With so much of the official record still off-limits, what kind of research could you do?

**Jim:** Well, I went to Beirut and I talked with the uncle of this guy, Ziad. And I went to Hamburg; Ziad's trajectory was through Hamburg, part of that Hamburg cell that included Mohamed Atta.

The journalism that is the best on this is largely German, and it's because of the Hamburg cell. A lot of the writing and research that has been done in Germany leads you to the conclusion that 9/11 was really the result of about eight individuals.

The brilliance of the 9/11 operation, and the immense luck from the standpoint of Osama bin Laden, is that these individuals in Hamburg—four young men from a sophisticated, westernized, graduate-student background—wanted to satisfy their obligation for jihad. It was not all about training camps in Afghanistan, but about finding these little cells of bright, westernized individuals.

So I did those trips, and of course the 9/11 Commission Report itself is very useful. There's a lot of fascinating material in there. You have to master all of that before you really start digging elsewhere.

**TS:** How did you find people to interview? And how did you get them to talk about a subject so profoundly sensitive?

**Jim:** This is really a standard problem for a journalist: How do you get people to talk who really have a difficult story? I've been around Washington for quite a long time now, and I've got some good contacts. There was a woman here who became my fixer in Lebanon, setting up my interviews. In the case of this particular story, Ziad's uncle had become a kind of press spokesman. He was the one who agreed to interviews on behalf of the family.

In talking to him, I found that they're in total denial. Ziad's family don't believe he did it; they think he was a victim. They think maybe he was going on a vacation to California or something like that. So they're in total denial.

**TS:** How did you react to that? Was it hard for you to hear them deny it?

**Jim:** That crime is so incredible, and so awful, I think the normal human reaction is one of denial. But I did, when I got back to Washington, mail them a copy of the 9/11 Commission Report.

**TS:** How did the research shape the plot?

**Jim:** Well, the lover in Germany, Ziad's girlfriend, became a principal character. We see the life of Ziad al-Jarrah through his lover, who professes not to know anything about the 9/11 plot. Though they were in a long relationship, Jarrah supposedly never told her anything about it. She had her suspicions.

And so the construct of the book is such that the action really happens after 9/11. The real woman received a posthumous letter—this is actually true—that Ziad had written the night before the operation as a farewell to her. So what I have imagined in this book is that he not only wrote that farewell letter, but that he had been recording his recollections about how this whole thing had been happening.

In my book, seven days after 9/11 she gets this packet not only with his farewell letter but with these tapes in which he has told her his whole story. Then it becomes a question of whether she turns this over to the police.

This is personal for her—she wants to know what's in it, what's on the tapes, and it becomes a kind of cat-and-mouse game between her and the police. She knows that if she turns the package over, she'll never see the tapes or hear Ziad's explanation. So it becomes a sort of complicated construct where we hear his story through the lens of the lover and the relationship between her and Ziad.

**TS:** Were you able to speak with her before writing the book?

**Jim:** No; she was long since lost to history. To begin with, the German police put her into protective custody and she was always barred from the press. Then she dropped from sight, and nobody knows where she is. I wrote her a letter, but it was returned.

So I have completely created her character, and in some ways that's a good thing. If she had actually talked to me, and then she didn't like the way she was portrayed, then you could get into legal difficulty. But I can now say that this is completely made up out of whole cloth.

**TS:** What's the value in taking a story like this and turning it into a human-scale narrative? Do you think people are going to rebel against the notion of humanizing a 9/11 hijacker?

**Jim:** Well, the comfortable thing in America is for us to leave these people as stick figures and monsters, not as human beings. If we leave them as stick figures and monsters, then we don't understand anything about how this kind of bestial act could take place.

I want to know, what's the whole evolution of the mindset that could lead a very attractive guy with a lot going for him through this arc, from Beirut through Hamburg to Florida and into the mud of Shanksville, Pennsylvania? We need to try to understand what that process can be like, what's the motivation, what touches that, what leads one to violence of that cataclysmic nature.

That would be my argument. We need to understand these people if we're going to protect ourselves.

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