

Maureen Thornton

*The Obsessions, the Overall Work:
An Interview with James Reston Jr.*

INTRODUCTION

WITH a bibliography that ranges from playwriting and fiction to nonfiction works on science, politics, medieval history, and current events, James Reston Jr. could be called a modern Renaissance man. My first acquaintance with the author was through the movie *Frost/Nixon* (2008), which was based on *The Conviction of Richard Nixon*, Reston's 2007 book about his role as David Frost's advisor for the televised interviews that led to Nixon's admission of guilt.

Reston describes his body of work as a "series of obsessions," and, no doubt, such diverse and well-received accomplishments can only be achieved by one obsessed with his subjects. From books on historical themes, such as the Inquisition and the life of Galileo, to more modern topics such as the Jonestown massacre in Guyana and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, his insatiable intellectual curiosity and strong sense of social justice are threads connecting much of his work.

With roots firmly planted in the Northeast—he was born in New York, where his father was editor for the *Times*, and was raised in Washington, D.C.—Reston developed a love for the South while attending the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, and he still considers the evolution of the American South to be one of the most fascinating stories of his time. Reston was at his home in Martha's Vineyard when we spoke by telephone just before the release of his latest book, *A Rift in the Earth: Art, Memory, and the Fight for a Vietnam War Memorial*, in the fall of 2017.

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Maureen Thornton (MT): You've written extensively on historical events, most often from the viewpoint of an observer or a scholar, but the Vietnam War was a very personal experience for you. How did your personal involvement in the war influence your approach to *A Rift in the Earth*, and how was this writing experience different from others?

James Reston Jr. (JR): Well, I've had two very personal writing experiences. The first was *Fragile Innocence* [2006], which was about my handicapped daughter and was even more difficult to write than *A Rift in the Earth*. Our family had the rather rare experience of a child who was perfectly normal until the age of eighteen months. Then some undefined virus attacked her brain, destroyed her language, and gave her a seizure condition. *That* evolved into a kidney disorder, because the doctors were trying so hard to control the seizures—but with medication that caused kidney failure, which necessitated a kidney transplant. Here we are, thirty-five years later, and she still has this problem. Writing that story was very hard work.

A Rift in the Earth was very different emotionally, and there were two keys. One was that I am a veteran and had a buddy I trained with in Army Intelligence who was killed on the first day of the Tet offensive, January 30, 1968. That could very well have been me. He volunteered for Vietnam because he had difficulties with his commanding officer; I was subsequently deployed to the same unit in Hawaii, had the same difficulties with the same officer, and also volunteered for Vietnam. But circumstances legislated against my going. The nature of Maya Lin's wall is that the living look at the names, especially of those they may have known in the service, and their own image is reflected on that wall. When I go to visit Maya Lin's wall, I look at the name of my friend and my own name is reflected, emotionally and psychologically.

That was one tie. The other was that I was friendly with Frederick Hart, the sculptor of *Three Soldiers*, which was ultimately the compromise work that allowed the wall to be built. I was always fascinated by that struggle: this very well-organized group of veterans absolutely hated the original design and did everything they could to undermine it. They came very close to scuttling Maya Lin's wall altogether, but ultimately a compromise was made, in which Hart was commissioned to do a traditional sculpture of three soldiers. This satisfied the veterans to some extent.

So you had a great overall question about how the first lost war in American history was to be memorialized—that very much interested me. And then

you had this artistic conflict between two totally different concepts of art that were forced together in a kind of shotgun marriage, as a way to get the thing actually built.

MT: One of the objectives of art is to elicit an emotional response, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial certainly does that. Why do you think the controversy over the design was so strong?

JR: Much has been chronicled about the nature of a wall that is underground and is black granite. There was a lot of back and forth about whether black was the color of shame, and this group of veterans argued that to have black granite was an insult to veterans. They argued that the memorial was basically a cemetery that underscored the loss of the war—the ones who were killed—but said nothing about those who had survived. Then there was the very interesting question of patriotism, which is really basic to the experience of the entire Vietnam generation: what moral choice is made by a young man, especially in the context of the draft, by serving one's country in a flawed and possibly immoral effort? These are profound issues, and people feel strongly on both sides. Then, of course, there is the question of those who did serve and survived. So many of them were wounded not only physically but also psychologically, and their feelings had to be addressed somehow.

A lot of very interesting emotional issues swirled around the whole process of building a memorial: the response to a lost cause—that was cultural—and also a psychological individual response.

MT: Do you feel you speak for a unique generation, one that faced a military draft, and a war that was, in your words, “flawed and possibly immoral”? Do you feel an urgency to do so while this generation, now mostly in its seventies, is alive?

JR: Yes, absolutely—although it is not necessarily for the benefit of a generation, but more just thinking about my generation and my own situation within it, because I do believe the Vietnam generation is unique. In my case, as a Northerner coming to school in the South at Chapel Hill in 1959, it was the amazing experience being a student at UNC from '59 to '63, and having desegregation happening right in front of me. There were three anchors to my career which I have mined ever since: one was the civil rights revolution, coming out

of that experience at UNC; second was the dilemma of that generation with regard to Vietnam and my own personal dilemma of what to do about draft-age young men serving in a war that was (it has become increasingly clear to me) deeply flawed; third was my attitude as a Northerner toward the South.

So, I have mined those three things for forty years in one way or another—but back to the broader issues: I do think the amazing revolution that took place with desegregation and the unique dilemma of the war make the Vietnam generation absolutely unique.

MT: How do you think future generations will perceive the Vietnam War in contrast to the late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century wars? And what would be a fitting memorial to the recent wars?

JR: Well, you know we had that whole flurry of activity around the World War II generation as being the greatest generation, but it's my view that the World War II generation is really rather irrelevant to the post-1945 period, and that the Vietnam generation's experience is much more relevant, insofar as what young men and women were asked to do as citizens of the United States. We had the so-called Vietnam syndrome, when it was alleged that America had lost its mojo and was skittish about getting into any wars. That was coupled with the volunteer army, which relieved the next generation as a whole from the requirement of national service. I mourn that deeply, and I think there is a great imperative for all Americans, when they're young, to serve their country in one way or another as a badge of citizenship. But, partly for political reasons, Richard Nixon scrapped the draft and made a volunteer army. The wars that have come along subsequently—the Gulf War in the Nineties and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars—were fought entirely by recruits to a volunteer force. The down side of that, and in my view almost the immoral side of it, is that our armies are now built on the backs of rural and inner-city urban young people who really don't see themselves as having a future, and therefore are tempted to go into the military. That creates a separation between the soldier and the body politic. In America it scarcely seems at the moment that we are at war, because the conflicts don't touch domestic life. So there is a kind of hypocrisy. We celebrate these young men in Iraq and Afghanistan as heroes, but really, implicitly, there is the feeling that, "Well, those guys asked for it and they volunteered to do that, so good for them—I'm glad it wasn't me."

Jan Scruggs, the driving force behind the making of the Vietnam memorial, is now trying to get a memorial underway for the victims of global terrorism, because for him there is a direct stitch between the two groups. How that will be handled artistically is far beyond me to know.

One of the lovely, unique things about *A Rift in the Earth* is a color gallery of eighteen other submissions to the Vietnam Memorial competition. It is remarkable the ways artists addressed the question of how a lost war should be memorialized in Washington; there will be a similar question for artists who try to conceptualize what would be physically appropriate for those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

MT: How do you think the twenty-first-century media reality has affected the role of war correspondents and the challenges they face?

JR: I think the journalism that was done by correspondents during the Vietnam War was more authentic than the war journalism now being done. In the case of Vietnam, correspondents had the full range to go anywhere they wanted—any battle, with any platoon or company—and witness whatever they wanted to witness. That brought television images of the direct combat right into the living rooms of the American people, and those had a huge impact on turning them against the war. In the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Pentagon embeds journalists in various military units of one sort or another, so that where journalists should be and what they witness becomes a point of commission and authorization by the Pentagon. As a result, I don't think we have anything like the searing images of warfare from Iraq and Afghanistan that we had for Vietnam. More than that, the casualty rate in Vietnam was much greater than it is now, which plays to my previous point about the disconnection between the body politic and the combat.

MT: The body of work you have produced is really eclectic and makes me wonder: do you identify more as a journalist or an historian?

JR: Neither, in a way. I'm a pretty straightforward writer and always wanted to live a literary life. I've written a lot about many things, but I've never written about anything that didn't engage me emotionally and intellectually. That may speak to a mind that is pretty scattered, because as you say there is a broad range of subject matter there. But I think this is the life of a writer—to go to

those subjects that really fascinate you and do the best that you can with them. I never really wanted to get into a one-write rut and do the same thing over and over again. When I approach a new project, I like the idea of it being different from anything I've ever done before, because that is intellectually exciting to me and emotionally engaging.

MT: On your website there is an article about outer space where you wrote, "In retrospect, I suppose the most important consequence of my space obsession in the 1980s was to give me a deep interest in astronomy. And that would lead to my *National Geographic* piece on the Orion constellation and my cover story in *Time* magazine, May 23, 1994, on the incredible collision of so-called Shoemaker-Levy 9 comets into the planet Jupiter. But most importantly, it would lead to my biography of Galileo, a book that would change the course of my career dramatically." How did that book change the course of your career?

JR: Well, that whole obsession with space—and I would have to say that my writing life has been a series of obsessions—was prompted by the talk of putting a writer in space. Of course, this came on the heels of a program to put a teacher there. As the teacher was being readied to go into the space-shuttle program, the effort to choose a writer to be the next civilian to go on the shuttle was underway, and I was the *Newsweek*, PBS, and BBC candidate to be that writer. So here was a situation where only about one hundred people had ever experienced space, and I thought it was just irresistible to try to compete to be that writer. I did a lot of writing about various interesting and related things. The Shoemaker-Levy 9 collision with Jupiter was an absolutely amazing phenomenon. The constellation Orion is where I imagine my father resides, because I like to think of a very specific place in the heavens where he and my mother live. And then I was doing a number of projects at the Johnson Space Center about astronauts, including three films for public television that related to space. That was all by way of enhancing my candidacy to go up on the space shuttle.

Along the way, the Galileo mission to Jupiter was one of the great NASA missions in the early 1980s. That interested me a lot. In learning more about the Galileo mission, the historical figure of Galileo became of great interest to me. You have at the center a very interesting, difficult antiauthoritarian figure who's thumbing his nose at everybody, and he is also somewhat of a hustler. The personality of Galileo is at the core of the story, and that's terrific. Then,

as a commercial enterprise, he improves the spyglass, turns it to the heavens, and notices a dynamic universe—and that new knowledge absolutely changes world history. As if *that* is not enough for a biography, he gets into an amazing conflict with the Roman Catholic Church on the question of science versus faith. So the story has a perfect dramatic parabola of a personality at the center who rises to the point of discovering the dynamic universe, and then goes into the profound subject of science versus faith. *Galileo: A Life* [1994] had eight or nine foreign editions, and continues to be used in universities and high schools. I think it showed my editors in New York that I could write about medieval history for a popular audience, and it led to my other works on medieval history, all of which I would argue are very relevant to the current affairs of the United States, particularly on the subject of the clash between Christianity and Islam.

MT: Let's talk about *Galileo's Torch*, the play based on the book. When did it premiere?

JR: It started in 2014 as an amateur production in Virginia at an outdoor amphitheater, and was attended by about five hundred people. Then it went on to the Italian embassy in Washington, followed by Martha's Vineyard Playhouse, a full production at University of Oklahoma, and then to the Folger Shakespeare Theatre in March 2017. We had three performances in late July 2017 at the Castleton festival that was organized by the great opera conductor Lorin Maazel. The play is going through a normal development process. The Folger performance had text and the Folger Consort, which is a famous early-music consort. Scenes from the play were interspersed with the period music. We then did it quite differently in Castleton. I am exploring dramatic possibilities of this story, because at the center of the play is the crushing of Galileo by the Inquisition. When I was doing the Galileo biography and researching in Rome, I got the actual Q&A of the inquisitional sessions with Galileo, and it's just a searing psychodrama. So that became the climax of *Galileo's Torch*, and it's really quite wonderful.

MT: What are the challenges of transitioning a work from written medium to live performance?

JR: The first and overarching challenge is one of compression. That Galileo biography is over eighty thousand words and a play is maybe seven to eight

thousand. When great historical events are to be compressed into a performance of about an hour and a half, you have to cut a lot of corners and go for the essence of the story. You hope that the material will bring the story alive in a way that is a different experience from reading a book.

As you know, I was very involved with the David Frost interviews with Richard Nixon, and this was an example of how the writer becomes a participant. When we interrogated Nixon on the Watergate scandal, after four hours of continuous interrogation he was finally broken. It was a huge event when he apologized and, in effect, admitted his crimes, a huge accomplishment of television and interrogation television. In the actual history, the Watergate interrogation of Nixon by Frost took four hours over two days. In the play *Frost/Nixon*, the president collapses in seven minutes.

MT: The free press is such a critical component of a free democracy, and the work of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in breaking Watergate has been one of the most memorable examples of this tenet in our nation's history. You must have a unique perspective on the impact of investigative journalism on American politics, given your role as David Frost's Watergate advisor preparing him for the interviews with Richard Nixon, which ultimately led to Nixon's admission of guilt.

JR: Of course there is a difference between what Woodward and Bernstein did, and what I did with David Frost. What Woodward and Bernstein did was just an amazing case of investigative journalism, following the money and finally having the Deep Throat source. What I was involved with three years after Nixon had resigned was a sort of limbo period when we could say, "Yes, he resigned in disgrace from office," but he hadn't really addressed Watergate in a public forum the way he was led to do in the David Frost interviews. Therefore, the historical burden I personally felt, as the Watergate advisor to David Frost, was to ensure that Richard Nixon was brought to account for his criminality, and not only to admit it, but to apologize for it—that was the goal. That was entirely different from what Woodward and Bernstein did, but my work did involve some considerable investigation. The fact that I was able to come up with new material that could surprise Nixon, and therefore change the dynamic event that was the interview, was part investigation, but was also part scholarship, because that material could have been found by any of the eight hundred or so journalists who followed the Watergate trials. As we moved forward from that period, the David Frost event was sometimes called "gotcha

journalism.” In a way, that became a pejorative term, to say that all journalists were looking for was “gotcha moments.” I think that trivializes journalism. What we have beyond that term is something that is lasting and historically significant, the admission of guilt and the apology.

MT: How do you think investigative long-form journalism, in general, has evolved since the time of Watergate?

JR: It is very hard to do long-form magazine writing anymore, because the outlets have essentially dried up. There are still magazines like the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic*, and *Vanity Fair*, but the number of pieces that are used by the magazines that are of a serious nature—the kind of thing I would be interested in—just couldn’t support a career anymore. There are also other ways in which printed news has changed. When my first novel was published in 1971, it had probably fifty to sixty reviews, because every newspaper had its book editor and its book page. All that has dried up now. Publishers don’t pay all that much attention to critical reactions to the books they publish. It is much more commercial, much more bottom-line oriented, so that has certainly changed the way in which authors work. It is just much more difficult to make a living as an author anymore because of these changes.

MT: You spoke earlier of your writing life as having been a series of obsessions. I would think that obsession was a critical quality that allowed you to persevere through the research and writing of your book on the Jonestown massacre, *Our Father Who Art in Hell: The Life and Death of the Reverend Jim Jones* [1981]. You’ve described this as the most difficult and emotional book you have written. Was it obsession that drove you at first to embark on this project, or did the obsession come later in trying to understand the event? Did you think it would take such an emotional toll before you began the research?

JR: Well, a serious author’s life is usually a sequence of two- or three-year preoccupations, at least in my case, and that is what I think distinguishes an author from a journalist, who can publish either immediately as a newspaper person or in the next three or four months as a magazine writer. The nature of individual writers’ sensibilities is that not everyone wants to stay with one subject exclusively. It was always very important to me that if I were to commit

to a book it would be on a subject that I deeply cared about and was deeply interested in, and that is what sustains an obsession. Beyond that, if the work is to be original, there has to be an obsession to go for original material so that, at the end, the reviewers will say there are a lot of surprises in this work. I've come to think of my career as a sequence of obsessions.

The Jonestown event came toward the end of my time teaching creative writing at Chapel Hill, and by then—the late seventies—I maintained an obsession with civil rights and the Vietnam War. And I had started to get very interested in literary technique and started to develop, mainly through the Joan Little experience, a concept of the novelist's event. [*The Innocence of Joan Little: A Southern Mystery* (1977) covered the celebrated 1975 trial of Joan Little, a young black woman who was attacked in prison by her jailer, whom she killed, and then escaped.]

MT: It is obsession that allows you, as a writer, to become intimate with your story and characters, but when dealing with dark and disturbing topics that same obsession can work against you emotionally. Having gone through this process, do you think it is possible for an author to embrace a disturbing story and at the same time maintain a healthy distance? What advice would you give to an author in that position?

JR: Well, I'm certainly not the only one who has gone through that experience—there is a collection of very good writers who have addressed some of the darkest aspects of our history and our society, and also in their private lives. In order to say something new and original, you just have to put yourself completely in the story, not only intellectually but emotionally, and it can be dangerous to do so. Take for example John Hersey, with *Hiroshima* [1946]. How to tell that story for the *New Yorker* in some way without losing his sanity or his humanity was a huge challenge. Well, it was a similar thing with Jonestown. I struggled with that personally, but I was sustained by writers like Bill Styron. If you have a really important event that you can tell well, you should pursue it with everything that you've got. Of course, Styron had also been in that dark place for five years with the Holocaust, writing *Sophie's Choice* [1979]. It is a balancing act, to enter as deeply as you can without destroying your sanity or your humanity, but others have done it and I did too. The work certainly had a deep impact on me personally, but I survived it okay.

MT: What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment?

JR: The overall work, I think. I wanted to live the literary life and it's been a rocky road, but I have persisted and I have a body of work that I am proud of—proud of its range, and that I have been engaged in a lot of important, still-relevant issues in the last forty years. At the same time, this work has been received for its literary qualities, and I'm proud of that too.

Editor's note: James Reston Jr. is the author of the books *To Defend, To Destroy* (1971); *The Amnesty of John David Herndon* (1972); *The Knock at Midnight* (1975); *The Innocence of Joan Little: A Southern Mystery* (1977); *Our Father Who Art in Hell: The Life and Death of Jim Jones* (1981); *Sherman's March and Vietnam* (1984); *Lone Star: The Life of John Connally* (1989); *Collision at Home Plate: The Lives of Pete Rose and Bart Giamatti* (1991); *Galileo: A Life* (1994); *The Last Apocalypse: Europe in the Year 1000 AD* (1998); *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade* (2001); *Dogs of God: Columbus, the Inquisition, and the Defeat of the Moors* (2005); *Fragile Innocence: A Father's Memoir of His Daughter's Courageous Journey* (2006); *The Conviction of Richard Nixon: The Untold Story of the Frost/Nixon Interviews* (2007); *Defenders of the Faith: Charles V, Suleyman the Magnificent, and the Battle for Europe, 1520–1536* (2009); *The Accidental Victim: JFK, Lee Harvey Oswald, and the Real Target in Dallas* (2013); *Luther's Fortress: Martin Luther and His Reformation Under Siege* (2015); and *A Rift in the Earth: Art, Memory, and the Fight for a Vietnam War Memorial* (2017); and of the play *Jonestown Express* (1984).