

Charles Frazier *↪ Cold Mountain*

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A Biographical Sketch

For several decades now numerous critics have announced the death of the novel; critical theorists have declared the writer himself irrelevant, if not defunct; and members of the New Southern Studies movement have suggested that not only is southern literature at an end, but the South itself never really existed, except in the fevered imaginations of New Critics, Agrarians, and Faulknerians. It is one of those historic ironies that in the midst of this grandiloquent nay-saying that someone such as Charles Frazier steps forward to publish a genuine masterpiece in the southern literary tradition and demonstrates that the funeral speech was premature.

Amazingly enough his novel, *Cold Mountain*, published on June 1, 1997, remained at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list for forty-three weeks, rivaled in southern fiction only by Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. By 1998 1.6 million copies had been sold. *Cold Mountain* won the National Book Award, the Book Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and it served as the basis for a popular award-winning film released on December 25, 2003. It was that anomaly in American fiction in general, a beautifully written, profoundly thoughtful, but widely read popular novel. Over a decade later, *Cold Mountain* retains its appeal as demonstrated by continued sales in hardcover and paperback editions.

At the time of publication Charles Frazier was a forty-seven-year-old former professor of English who had left academe for free-lance writing and for being a home father to his daughter. He was born in Asheville, North Carolina, on November 4, 1950, and grew up in the small towns of Andrews and Franklin in western North Carolina, not far from the majestic Cold Mountain he would make famous in his novel. His parents taught him to value literature and to learn the folklore and family history of the region.

Frazier earned his bachelor of arts degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1973, his master of arts from Appalachian State University in 1975, and his doctoral degree in American literature from the University of South Carolina in 1986. His dissertation topic was "The Geography

of Possibility: Man in the Landscape of Recent Western Fiction,” highly relevant research for the novel he would write. During these years he married, had a child, and coauthored two books. The first was a textbook in 1980 with Robert Ingram, *Developing Communication Skills for the Accounting Profession*, and the second, in 1985 with Donald Seacrest, was a travel guide for the Sierra Club based on his own journey through the several South American countries through which the Andes Mountains run, *Adventuring in the Andes*. Both he and his wife taught at the University of Colorado in Boulder before moving to North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Frazier produced a few short stories before leaving his teaching position to focus on a book he had wanted to write for years. Frazier and his family lived on a horse farm near Raleigh until the success of *Cold Mountain*. They now have a home in Florida and a summer residence outside Asheville near the life and culture that nourishes his fiction. In 2006 Frazier published *Thirteen Moons*, his second novel, which so far has not met with the public enthusiasm and critical acclaim that was and is accorded *Cold Mountain*.

Cold Mountain

Frazier knew from the start that he wanted to write about life in the Appalachian Mountains and the sturdy stock of people who settled there and somehow survived on minimal sustenance and primitive endurance. “I knew I wanted to write about those old folkways,” he has said, “but I needed some point of access. I was given such an entry . . . when my father told me about an ancestor of ours, a man named Inman who left the war and walked home wounded. . . . The story sounded like an American odyssey and it also seemed to offer itself as a form of elegy for that lost world I had been thinking about. So I set out on Inman’s trail and followed it for five years of writing” (Frazier, “Diary” 3).

While the novel belongs to the popular genre of Civil War fiction, it is not actually about that cataclysmic event. As he began work, Frazier says, “I was not then thinking about writing a Civil War novel, and though I am triply qualified for acceptance into the Sons of Confederate Veterans, I remain largely uninterested in the great movements of troops, the famous personality traits of the noble generals and tragic presidents.” Rather he was interested in the ordinary people who “were caught in the crossfire of two incompatible economies” (“Diary,” 2), that is, the agrarian slave-based economy of the South and the industrial-based capitalist economy of the North. Although Frazier’s central character noted that “men talked of war as if they committed it to preserve what they had and what they believed,” Inman found it to be a set of “new laws whereunder you might kill all you wanted and not be jailed, but rather be decimated” (Frazier, *Cold Mountain*, 218).

Thus *Cold Mountain* neither glorifies nor romanticizes the Civil War but shows its impact and meaning for the ordinary people who fought and endured

it. This is human history at the ground level, how it appeared to those at the bottom of the economic and social ladder. Frazier's characters are mostly poor whites seeking to find some values by which to live, some principles in which to believe, something to give their lives meaning in these turbulent times. Like Faulkner's farmers and country people, they endure.

There are many very traditional and familiar elements that help account for the enormous popularity of the novel. In telling the story of an exhausted warrior returning home from a bloody war to his patient and waiting beloved, both readers and critics alike quickly picked up on the fact that the classic war epic, Homer's *Odyssey*, provided the novel's structure. Frazier told one interviewer how this happened:

When my father told me the story of this ancestor, that was one of the first things I thought of—that there were certain parallels to *The Odyssey* that might be useful in trying to think of a way to tell this story. A warrior, weary of war, trying to get home and facing all kinds of impediments along the way, a woman at home beset by all kinds of problems of her own that are as compelling as his. So I reread *The Odyssey*—that was one of the first things I did when I really began working on the book. There was a certain temptation to write parallel scenes—to try to have a Cyclops scene, or whatever. But really quickly I decided that that would be pretty limiting and kind of artificial. So I just let *The Odyssey* stay in the back of my mind as a model of a warrior wanting to put that war behind him and get home. (Vintage 2003, 2–3)

In a thorough study of the classical parallels and references in the novel, which are numerous and plentiful, Ava Chitwood has suggested that “it is the familiar shape of the *Odyssey* to which most readers respond” (2004, 234).

Those familiar with the larger body of twentieth-century southern literature also recognize in the novel, Albert Way has argued, “a portrait of an agrarian-based society free of a hovering industrial complex”: “As with [Wendell] Berry and the Agrarians, local knowledge is of primary importance to Frazier as well, and there is a genuine movement afoot today in some quarters for a return to a local knowledge-based system of land use. In writing a story set in preindustrial Appalachia, Frazier has projected on the past what many people want for the future” (2004, 36, 38).

Yet Frazier has avoided the trap of racial exclusiveness practiced by the Nashville Agrarians by presenting “a perspective more reflective of the post-Civil Rights era,” as Ed Piacentino has suggested. By avoiding racial stereotypes and bigoted white characters, he is actually reporting “a viewpoint towards race common among Appalachian inhabitants who typically did not own slaves and who did not really support slavery, an attitude . . . that is consonant with historical plausibility” (2001–2, 100–101). The frequent cross-racial bonding then that appears in the novel as outlined by Piacentino, among whites, Native

Americans, and blacks, is not simply designed to appeal to modern readers but also to portray a likely historic reality.

Indeed a part of Frazier's project in the novel seems to be an eradication of common stereotypes, black and white alike. The blacks are mainly background figures but always helpful, kind, and humane, like the slave who gave Inman food and shelter after he was shot by the Home Guard. In his discussions with the old goat woman Inman encounters on his journey, he does not recall defending slavery as one of the reasons he joined the Confederate army. He never owned any slaves, he says, and "not hardly anybody I know did" (217). But she reminds him that he was doing so, no matter his intention.

In the harshness and brutality of war, the southern gentleman has given way to men involved in a base-level struggle for survival, as reflected in Frazier's quotation in his first epigraph from one of Charles Darwin's journal entries. The women, especially Ada and Ruby, are among some of the strongest, most resourceful, and enduring figures we have in southern literature. It is the stereotype of the southern mountaineer, however, that is most firmly debunked. Ada gives fullest expression to the nature of that image: "All of their Charleston friends had expressed the opinion that the mountain region was a heathenish part of creation, outlandish in its many affronts to sensibility, a place of wilderness and gloom and rain where man, woman, and child grew gaunt and brutal, addicted to acts of raw violence with not even a nod in the direction of self-restraint. Only men of gentry affected underdrawers, and women of every station suckled their young, leaving the civilized trade of wet nurse unknown. Ada's informants had claimed the mountaineers to be but one step more advanced in their manner of living than the tribes of vagrant savages" (42). Among the numerous mountain folk that populate the novel, a few are indeed malicious and cruel, but a far greater number are decent, civilized, and good-hearted people. God's variety is found among them as in every other branch of humanity in the South and elsewhere.

Other critics have recognized the pleasures of a classically balanced and aesthetically pleasing structure that can be found in the novel beyond the *Odyssey* influence. Bill McCarron and Paul Knole have explicated the transformation of the novel from a narrative about war to "a novel of peace and triumph in the best romantic literary tradition": "Frazier achieves this transformation through a masterful combination of parallelism (where characters, scenes, and symbols 'double,' prefigure, and are reduplicated by other characters, scenes, and symbols) and antithesis (where events and symbols demand dual, antithetical interpretation)" (273).

Not all critics, however, have been satisfied with exactly what Frazier does with the romantic literary tradition. Novelist Madison Smartt Bell, in an appreciation of another novelist he greatly admires, Cormac McCarthy, has accused Frazier of stealing from McCarthy:

The prize-winning, best-selling *Cold Mountain* is a case in point. Here again the author (in terms of the style of the work) appears to be channeling Cormac McCarthy. In the storyline involving the wanderings of the wounded soldier Inman, not only the language but the content of the episodes is derived from McCarthy's work. Inman drifts around through a dark, inimical world, full of incomprehensible, unreasoning violence. He meets highwaymen and bushwhackers and other pilgrims with missions still more peculiar than his own and inscrutable but garrulous hermits who utter obscure but extensive discourses—in short he has all the adventures one would expect a Cormac McCarthy character to have. Except that these adventures do not have the same significance that they would have in a Cormac McCarthy novel. In fact, they don't have any significance. These episodes constitute a series of ornamental layers draped over the sentimental love story at the heart of *Cold Mountain*. In this respect the novel resembles a marshmallow elaborately wrapped up in barbed wire, and so, no doubt, deserves its great success. (Bell 1999, 28)

Bell's argument that Frazier had adapted the grim, lyrical prose of McCarthy is puzzling. Frazier's balanced, elegantly evocative prose is quite different stylistically from McCarthy's. That is not what actually seems to irritate Bell anyway. Rather it is that he reads the novel as at heart "a sentimental love story" wrapped in the coarseness of human experience. As if it were Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* masquerading as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

If *Cold Mountain* is to be read as simply a love story, then it has one of the most discordant endings of any such romance in literary history. Inman and Ada have but one night together, and rather than grant them any hope of a future life as a reward for all the cruel suffering and despair they both have witnessed and experienced, as one would expect in a romance, Inman is unceremoniously shot out of his saddle and killed by an unworthy opponent. Ada has not even the naïve certainty of Scarlet O'Hara that tomorrow is another day. There will be no other days. There will be only the consolation of a beautiful child left behind and the possibility of a lineage.

This unhappy ending is the very thing that irritates another novelist critic, who otherwise would have nothing but praise for what Frazier accomplished. Donald Harington has noted the following in an interview:

One of the most beautiful novels in recent times is *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier. The prose is absolutely perfect. We are given a character that we immediately identify with, and we experience some of the most fabulous, excruciating adventures throughout the book. We really become him in a way we hardly ever do in a novel, regardless of whether we're male or female. Identification with the character is total. And then, in the end, the author rewards that absolute, total identification by murdering us. It's totally

unfair. It's a hideous thing to do to the reader. . . . I absolutely hated what Charles Frazier did when I got to the end of that book and felt so betrayed. . . . I'm sure somewhere out there there are people who like to have their books end so hideously. But I'm not one of them. (Hyde 2002, 98)

Frazier's fellow writers seem to want to have it both ways, each condemning the novel for what it is *not*. It may be a love story but one that turns the romance tradition on its head by thwarting any possible happy ending. It is a novel that offers satisfaction from another quite different tradition, one that values spiritual fulfillment over things of this world and detachment over materialism.

This is another major source of inspiration in *Cold Mountain* that has yet to be accounted for. The connection is found in the second of the book's two epigraphs, a quotation from an ancient Chinese poet about another place called Cold Mountain. A major symbol, indeed a major character in the novel, is the physical Cold Mountain itself, an actual mountain in the Blue Ridge range of western North Carolina, about twenty-five miles northeast of Asheville. It has an inaccessible and secluded summit of 6,030 feet inside Pisgah National Forest, which can be reached only by hiking along unmarked dirt trails and avoiding misleading dead ends. Only seasoned hikers can deal with the drops in temperature (ten degrees per one thousand feet of elevation) and help is not close at hand (there is no town of Cold Mountain as in the novel). Most people settle for viewing Cold Mountain and appreciating its dramatic and gorgeous vistas from afar, thus the promontory has long had a reputation as a remote but unspoiled jewel that remains just beyond our grasp (Whitmire 2004). Frazier's paternal grandparents owned a farm near the bottom of Cold Mountain, and he played and camped on the mountain as a boy.

In the novel, Cold Mountain becomes in the mind of Inman a spiritual sanctuary, a place where harmony and health might be restored, where the brutality and disappointments of the world might be ameliorated or burned away. It "soared in his mind as a place where all his scattered forces might gather" (17). His Cherokee friend Swimmer "believed Cold Mountain to be the chief mountain of the world. Inman asked how he knew that to be true, and Swimmer had swept his hand across the horizon to where Cold Mountain stood and said, Do you see a bigger'n?" (14). Here the particular serves not only as the universal but as the prototype.

There is another Cold Mountain, however, that lies behind this one. In the T'ien-t'ai Mountains in the northeastern corner of Chekiang Province, south of the Bay of Hangchow in China, there is a remote retreat named Hanshan, which means Cold Mountain in Chinese. These mountains, sources say, "famous for their wild and varied scenery, were from early times venerated as the home of spirits and immortals, and from the third century on became the site of numerous Taoist and Buddhist monasteries" (Watson 1970, 13).

In the late eighth or early ninth century, according to some scholars because knowledge of this man is very scant, a poet came to Cold Mountain in search of enlightenment and spent the rest of his days writing poems and inscribing them on rocks, trees, and the walls of houses. The name of this early graffiti poet has been lost to history, so we call him Cold Mountain or Han-shan, after the place of his retreat. Internal evidence in the poems suggests that Han-shan was a “gentleman farmer, troubled by poverty and family discord, who, after extensive wandering and perhaps a career as a minor official, retired to Cold Mountain. . . . In one poem he says he went to Cold Mountain at the age of thirty, and in another he speaks of having lived there thirty years” (Watson 1970, 9). Further research has indicated that he may have come from an educated family, although he was also familiar with the hardships of the farming life. A wife and son are mentioned several times in the poems, although he appears to have left them in pursuit of enlightenment (Hendricks 1990, 10–11).

Han-shan has traditionally been identified as a Buddhist poet of the Zen school, but if so, he seems to have lacked the confidence that came with Zen mastery because “in Zen, with its emphasis on individual effort and self-reliance, a man, once enlightened, is expected to stay that way” (Watson 1970, 14). Instead loneliness, doubt, and self-effacement are his usual themes, including the awareness that his rag-tag appearance evokes in others ridicule and laughter. As the poet says of himself in his most often quoted poem:

When men see Han-shan
They all say he's crazy
And not much to look at—
Dressed in rags and hides.
They don't get what I say
& I don't talk their language.
All I can say to those I meet:
“Try and make it to Cold Mountain.”
(Snyder 1965, 60)

Nor did he suffer the praise of those who approached him for wisdom or a blessing. When a court official of the T'ang Dynasty sought him out and found him in the kitchen of a temple, Han-shan shouted out crude taunts, ran out of the temple laughing, and hand-in-hand with fellow poet Shih-te disappeared into the mountains. This event gave rise to a longstanding tradition in art and painting that portrays the two poets as “two grotesque little men guffawing in the wilderness” and Han-shan as “the laughing recluse” (Watson 1970, 7–8, 14). All of this serves to underline the sense of humor and satirical spirit that resides in much of his poetry and the sense of detachment that moves him beyond the disillusionment and pain of the world.

Han-shan has been rendered into English by various hands, chiefly those of academic scholars. Among the most respected translators have been Arthur

Waley, Burton Watson, Robert G. Hendricks, and one who calls himself Red Pine, but the translations used by Charles Frazier are those by the Beat generation environmental poet, essayist, and activist Gary Snyder. Bringing his study of Chinese language to the task, as well as his own poetic sensibility as a poet in English, Snyder produced clear and concise renditions that capture the blunt simplicity and directness of the originals, as in the one from which Frazier quotes the first two lines as an epigraph:

Men ask the way to Cold Mountain
Cold Mountain: there's no through trail.
In summer, ice doesn't melt
The rising sun blurs in swirling fog.
How did I make it?
My heart's not the same as yours.
If your heart was like mine
You'd get it and be right here.
(Snyder 1965, 42)

This poem captures much of the emotional longing Frazier's character Inman has for his home and the profound difficulties he has reaching it. There is indeed "no through trail," no direct route, to the mountain of his desire where his beloved Ada dwells. He makes it there because of the power of love in his heart. Others who wish to make the journey to their Cold Mountains can only do so if their hearts are in accord with his in its understanding of the transcendent power of love beyond the physical and the material.

The poetry of Han-shan, like Chinese poetry in general, is remarkably accessible to all readers. As Burton Watson notes in *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, the "Chinese poetic tradition is on the whole unusually humanistic and commonsensical in tone. . . . For this reason, even works that are many centuries removed from us in time come across with a freshness and immediacy that is often quite miraculous. The Chinese poetic world is one that is remarkably easy to enter because it concentrates to such a large degree on concerns that are common to men and women of whatever place or time" (1984, 3). Gary Snyder puts it another way when he writes, "Chinese poetry, at its finest, seems to have found a center within the tripod of humanity, spirit, and nature. With strategies of apparent simplicity and understatement, it moves from awe before history to—a deep breath before nature" (1995, 91).

In undertaking his homeward journey, Inman has turned away from his "awe before history," especially the degradations and cruel banalities of war, and he needs to take "a deep breath before nature" by returning to the cleansing and healing air of his spiritual center, Cold Mountain. Early in the novel, Frazier notes: "Inman did not consider himself to be a superstitious person, but he did believe that there is a world invisible to us. He no longer thought of that world as heaven, nor did he still think that we get to go there when we die. Those

teachings had been burned away. But he could not abide by a universe composed only of what he could see, especially when it was so frequently foul. So he held to the idea of another world, a better place, and he figured he might as well consider Cold Mountain to be the location of it as anywhere” (17).

Had Inman lived to a ripe old age like Han-shan, he also would likely have expressed such thoughts as these:

If I hide out at Cold Mountain
 Living off mountain plants and berries—
 All my lifetime, why worry?
 One follows his karma through.
 Days and months slip by like water,
 Time is like sparks knocked off flint.
 Go ahead and let the world change—
 I'm happy to sit among these cliffs.
 (Snyder 1965, 53)

Frazier could not have chosen a more appropriate poet in whom to seek inspiration than Han-shan, given his larger theme that mankind must set aside his individuality and place in human history and seek to merge with the cyclic life of nature and the universal life force itself. For Inman nature represents safety, freedom, spiritual peace, and escape into immortality, as it did for Han-shan. Ada's father, Monroe, was fond of quoting another student of Asian philosophy and poetry, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who merged Eastern and Western thought in Transcendentalism. The novel, in fact, is full of references to books: Homer, Shakespeare, Dickens, and so on. But Ada finds that literature does not prepare one for life itself. As Han-shan said in one poem, “Reading books won't save you from death; / Reading books won't save you from poverty” (Watson 1970, 74). They can indeed blind one to the natural world and human nature. But she learns that, and Inman already knows it. What instructs them all, Han-shan, Ada, and Inman, are their respective Cold Mountains, East and West. That such thoughts seem to match the sensibilities of so many modern readers no doubt contributes to the novel's spectacular success.

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Cold Mountain. B2 Intermediate+. Frazier Charles. drama. 24711 89 18 35 102 200. She asks him to come back. Inman leaves the front and starts going home to cold Mountain and becomes a deserter. Tags: filmed love-story War friendship. Text Analysis: Unique words: 2128 Total words: 28836. Cold Mountain, which takes its title from a peak in the Great Balsam Mountains of Northern Carolina, certainly carries its author's knowledge of a particular area. But natural description is there to follow the two main characters' eyes and minds. Inman, a wounded deserter from the Confederate army, walks for weeks to try to get home. Every day Ada wakes to the same view, across to Cold Mountain. "The morning sky was featureless, a color like that made on paper from a thin wash of lampblack". The simile is not there to help the reader (what do we know of a wash of lampblack?) but to catch the perception of the character.