

Biography/Interview: Charles Frazier



Charles Frazier, American novelist, was born in 1950 in Raleigh, North Carolina, graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1973, and received his Ph.D. in English from the University of South Carolina in 1986.

His first novel, *Cold Mountain* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997, ISBN 0871136791) traces the journey of Inman, a deserter from the Confederate army near the end of the American Civil War. The work is rich in the culture and sensibilities of the North Carolina mountains and was based on local history and stories handed down from Frazier's great-great-uncle.

The novel won the 1997 National Book Award and was adapted to film by Anthony Minghella in the 2003 production *Cold Mountain*.



Interview

An Interview with Charles Frazer

It seems almost incredible that *Cold Mountain* is your first novel. Have you ever tried writing fiction before -- short stories, or incomplete unpublished novels?

Like a lot of people, I tried to write some fiction when I was in my twenties -- college age, just after that. It didn't work out so well. I wasn't happy with what I did; it was sort of pretentious and technically pretty weak. So I put that idea away and decided that I was going to be an academic and that I would study other people's writing rather than write myself. But when I got to be forty, I started wanting to write again for some reason, and found when I began doing it that what I was doing was very different from what I had done when I was twenty-five. I liked it better and was happier doing it, and it seemed to me to be worth doing,

suddenly. I think as you get older you get a sense of what is important in life and what is significant enough to write about.

Turning to *Cold Mountain*: Who was the original Inman?

He was my great-great-uncle. And part of the character was based on my great-grandfather. Both of them went to the Civil War -- volunteered in the first few months of that war fever and went off to battle. This Inman was in some of the worst fighting of the war. He was in Virginia and was in many battles in key positions. But I knew so little about him. There were no photographs of him; he wrote no letters home. It's just a little fragment of a family story about this guy -- of his war experience, his coming home, and what happened to him when he got there.

Was there something particular about his story, that struck you as especially dramatic?

The thing that interested me most -- and I think that caught my imagination when my father told me this story -- was his walk home, away from the war, toward home and the mountains of North Carolina. I thought about what he was getting away from and what he was walking toward. And that shaped the character and the whole direction of the novel.

How long did you think about Inman's story before deciding to turn it into a novel?

I'd been wanting to write a book that had the southern Appalachian Mountains as a primary force, almost like a main character, for quite some time, but I didn't know whether I wanted to write a work of fiction, nonfiction, or what. I had been keeping notebooks and doing a lot of background research: history, natural history, that kind of thing. But I didn't have a story. I didn't have a focus for the book; I just had material. So when my father told me this story, I immediately thought, "Well, there's my story, that's my focus," and I probably began working within two or three days.

So which elements of his story in the book were real, and which did you invent?

Well, we knew so little. The story my father told was a short paragraph, at most a few sentences, of facts -- a kind of an outline of a fairly short life. I tried to fill that in with research from his war records and the state archives and came up with maybe that much more. So what I had to begin with was two paragraphs about this fella. What I knew was what kind of family he was from, when he went to the war, the battles he was in, when he was wounded, when he left the war and went home, and what happened to him when he got there. I tried to keep that bare outline as true to the facts of his life as I could make it. But what the absence of information allowed me to do was to make up a character and make a story, and that's what novelists need to do. So in some sense I'm happy that I didn't have more information, that Inman didn't keep a journal for me to draw from, that I had to make it up.

What made you decide to base Inman's story on *The Odyssey*?

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.



Did you see any parallels between the actual American Civil War and the Trojan War?

Not in particular. I was pretty suspicious of writing a Civil War novel. I didn't want to write a novel of the battles and the generals and those famous personalities. There have been a lot of books written about that -- good ones and bad ones -- and I didn't want to add to the bulk of that literature. But I realized that there are two kinds of books about a war: there's an *Iliad*, about fighting the war, and about the battles and generals, and there's an *Odyssey*, about a warrior who has decided that home and peace are the things he wants. Once I decided that I was writing an *Odyssey* kind of book instead of an *Iliad* kind of book, I could move forward with it with some sense of happiness.

What characteristics did you give Inman to make him resemble Odysseus?

Well, that desire for home is certainly the core of it. There are wonderful passages in *The Odyssey* where Odysseus just sort of drifts into prayer -- these monologues that express his deepest desires. And I looked at those pretty carefully to discover what this character wants, what it is he's afraid of and running from, and what it is he's running toward. Those things helped me considerably.

The style of *Cold Mountain* is rather unconventional, not quite like that of any other book. Why did you decide to use this unusual rhythm and timbre?

I was interested in several things in the language of the book. One was: I was

creating this historical, fictional world, and I wanted the language of the book to create a sense of otherness, of another world, one that the reader doesn't entirely know. It occupies many of the same geographical points as our current world, but is in a lot of ways very different. I wanted the language to signal that. So one thing I used to help with that was words for tools and processes and kitchen implements that are almost lost words. Ugly, old words like "piggin" and "spurtle" and "keeler," which are all kitchen implements. Those kinds of words would signal to a reader that it's a different material world, a different physical world from ours. The other thing I was interested in, since I was writing a lot about the southern Appalachians, was getting a sense of the particular use of language in that region, the rhythm of it. I didn't want to resort to spelling liquor "l-i-k-k-e-r" or something like that. I wanted the music of that language more than just oddities of spelling and pronunciation. So I thought about the way old people talked when I was a kid, who had that authentic Appalachian accent, and realized that it was more a music, a rhythm, than anything else in my ear, and there were days that I could hear that -- a voice, a pattern of voice, somewhat like, say, Bill Monroe's when he was talking rather than singing, that has a very musical quality to it. When I could hear that in my ear, I was sure I was going to have a good day of writing.

The dialogue in *Cold Mountain* is memorably idiosyncratic. Do people still talk in that region that way the characters in the novel do?

You can find people who still talk that way, who use some of those old expressions, and have that old rhythm, but it's going quickly. Everybody listens to television and everybody begins to talk the same. There is a kind of loss of regional identity in that. But you still get that kind of very laconic response sometimes with real native mountaineers.

You must have done extensive research into the habits and routines of agriculture and farm life during the nineteenth century. How did you research this?

There are a couple of ways: the first thing was just memory. When I was growing up in the fifties and early sixties, there were still farms in the southern mountains that ran in that old nineteenth-century way. They maybe had electricity, but all the processes of farming were pretty much pre-twentieth century. That is, they didn't have tractors, they plowed with mules -- everything was done with animal power, lots of arms, with no powered equipment whatsoever. So it was an exercise in memory to try to recover the look of a farm like that, the rhythm of a day at a farm like that, the quiet of a place like that without the roar of an engine going on all the time. The parts that I couldn't remember from my childhood experience -- the details -- I filled in with library research. A lot of old journals and letters and things like that--where people would be talking about what their plans for the farm were -- were very helpful, and then more academic kinds of research on 19th-century agricultural practices.

Some might see library research as the least interesting part. How did you find it?

In many ways it's my favorite part of working on a book. I love to spend the day in the library with a handful of questions that I need answered. To be able to fill out this fictional world I'm trying to create. I always go in with five or six questions, but the things I actually find end up being much more interesting than the things that I went to find. The kinds of things I enjoy the most and that were the most helpful in writing the book were things like letters and journals of women of the nineteenth century. And I think they helped me a great deal in developing female characters that maybe are a little different from most people's stereotypical views of what women were like then. I found journals and letters of women who were very intelligent, headstrong, opinionated, strong women. One of the things I remember is a group of wealthy young women who had gone to a prep school in Charleston. They agreed when they graduated that they would have a reunion ten years later, but they decided that only the unmarried women could come to the reunion, because the married ones would by definition be boring. And I'm not sure that that is our view of nineteenth-century southern womanhood. I was very interested in reading letters to their husbands from women who'd been left at home to handle the family farm. To follow those letters over the course of the war, to feel those women getting stronger, more confident -- they had begun the war asking their husbands' permission for every decision that needed to be made. By about half way through the war, those same women were informing their husbands that decisions had been made. So it was a kind of process of self-mastery that I think is always a very helpful thing to observe.

Music plays a very large role in the book. Why is that?

One of the things that music does is sum up a culture in some very concrete way. That old-time fiddle music/string-band music of the southern Appalachians that's kind of an extension of Scottish and Irish and British folk music -- gave me access into that old culture and into that other time that seemed very direct. I began collecting this music when I first started working on the book, and when I could find something that would be, say, an old man in 1920 recording an old ballad or banjo tune or whatever, I felt like I was getting about as direct access to a piece of that old southern Appalachian culture of the nineteenth century as I was going to get.

Were you able to find old recordings that actually gave you a sense of the music of the Civil War era?

Yeah, that kind of music is more and more accessible. There are some wonderful reissues. Small recording companies have done a wonderful job of keeping that music alive. And in many cases this stuff may exist only on one or two scratchy old records. To have those things preserved on CD is wonderful.

There are very few people that write about nature as masterfully as you do. Are there any you particularly admire?

Well, there are lots. William Bartram was one of the great nature writers of the

early years of this country. He did a lot of traveling in the Southeast, through Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and wrote these beautiful, ecstatic descriptions of the very untouched world in the late 1700s. And he found his way into the book -- Inman reads, takes with him on his journey, a copy of Bartram's travels and reads them as a kind of tonic when he's feeling depressed or can't sleep or whatever. Some of the best nature writing I know of is in fiction. Melville, for example, wrote wonderful descriptions of the sea and sea life and that kind of thing. Tolstoy and Turgenev wrote wonderful descriptions of nature and had very close observational eyes. Hemingway in this century -- a story like "Big Two-Hearted River" has in it some of the best nature writing I know of anywhere. And of writers who are working now, a writer like Barry Lopez is probably the best going in this regard. Or a fiction writer like Jim Harrison, who has a very keen eye for the natural world. Those are all great writers that I read frequently and with great pleasure.

What views of the war and of politics do you feel the novel puts across?

I tried not to think about that too much when I was working on the book. I was interested in why a man like Inman went to this war -- why he volunteered. "It wasn't his fight," was my first thought on it -- he didn't own slaves and very few people he would have known did. Only about seven or eight percent of people in the southern mountains owned slaves. I think that he, and people like him, were fighting because they thought they were repelling an invasion of their homeland. But what I began to think about the politics of that war was that it was two economic systems -- you had this slave/agricultural system in the South and a growing industrial capitalist system in the North, and then you had people like Inman who lived in an older economic system, kind of like subsistence farming. You had people like that in the North and South, and one of the tragedies of the war to me was that those people got caught up, caught in the crossfire of this war. Many of them died fighting somebody else's battle.

Did your research on the Civil War period change your ideas on these subjects?

It did in some senses. I remember early on in writing the book, going for a walk in the mountains and coming upon a grave -- it was actually two graves, side by side -- in this lonesome hillside, five miles from the nearest road. I found out later that it was an old man and a boy who had been killed by federal raiders who had come over the mountains from Tennessee looking for food. They killed these two guys that were just going about their business. Near there is another double grave with a fiddler and a boy in it who were killed by Southern Home Guard in much the same way. Looking at those two graves, and seeing these people who were essentially farmers, caught in that crossfire and killed in this utterly pointless way -- I think that did shape some of my feeling toward the war.

Do you feel that thinking about the Civil War and Reconstruction can shed light on what goes on in the world today?

Well, I think that thinking about the past is always useful. To look at where we've

been and where we are and to think about what we've gained and what we've lost to get here, to think about whether that's been a good deal or not, I think is always useful.

How long did it take you to write *Cold Mountain*?

I think I worked on it for six or seven years. It's hard to say since I worked on it for quite a while without knowing that's what I was doing. I was just going up to the mountains, knowing I wanted to write a book set there, but I didn't have a story. I spent two or three years just trying to learn the kind of plant lore, for example, that would have been a piece of everyday knowledge in the nineteenth century and that we tend not to have these days. Learning that kind of thing, learning the details of local history, of local happenings, those kinds of things took a long time and didn't seem to have any purpose for quite a long time.

Once you had written the book, how did you go about finding a publisher?

Well, the novelist Kaye Gibbons is a friend of mine and she read the book when it was maybe halfway done and sent it off to her literary agency. A young agent there decided to take an interest in the book and I guess when it was three-quarters done, my agent said, "I think we're ready to send it out." She did, and had it sold within a couple, three weeks.

What were the reactions of people in the publishing industry when they read your work?

I don't know.... They bought it, so I guess some of them liked it.

Did anyone ever think that it would be even close to the success that it has become?

No, as a first novelist writing a book -- a book that for years and years was not under contract, I was just working on it and hoping to end up with a book that I liked and that I was happy that I had done, whatever happened with it. You'd be crazy to think of it becoming a bestseller, of winning literary awards, that kind of thing. So I think we were all kind of hoping for modest success within the realm of normal possibility. This has been an amazing experience.

How has the enormous success of the novel affected your day-to-day life, either positively or negatively?

Well, I have a whole lot less time to write than I used to. I've been doing a lot of book tour-related things for the past year, but other than that, the phone rings a lot more often than it used to, and I travel a lot more, but it's pretty similar.

What was your reaction upon winning the National Book Award?

Well, I certainly didn't think I would, and I just went up to the event thinking it would be a fun evening and that I would maybe get to see some writers that I had always admired, and have a chance to meet a few people. But when my name was announced, I was pretty surprised and had a hard time believing it for a second, I think.

Probably the most vivid aspect of the novel is your powerful feeling for the landscape of the Blue Ridge. Have you lived there all your life?

No, I grew up there and I spent a lot of time there as an adult, but I went off to college and lived in Colorado for a certain amount of time. But there are landscapes, I think, that people just identify as home, wherever home is. And for me, that's home. Whenever I'm back in those mountains, I feel like that's home, no matter how long I've been away. That's the place I know the best, and the place that in my imagination sums up all those things about being rooted and knowing a place and having a place.

Do you think you could be happy living in a big city?

No, I don't think so. Cities are nice to visit, but that's about it.

Are you at work on any other fiction?

I'm just in the very early stages of thinking about and taking notes about another book. I don't know whether this is actually what I'll do or not -- that's part of what I'm doing, is trying to decide. But I'm interested in the old mountain resorts in the southern Appalachians that had their high point in the early part of the twentieth century. And I'm interested in the relationship of those resorts, where before air-conditioning rich people would come and spend an entire summer to get away from the heat, and live these wonderful, elegant lives in beautiful surroundings. I'm also interested in where that money came from, which was often from cotton mills down in the lowland South, where people were working fourteen-hour days in 100-degree temperatures. So I'm doing some reading about those two kinds of cultures and seeing if I find a story there.

Do you plan on it turning into a full-length novel?

Well, that's the idea. I think there's a story there, and I'm trying to turn it up.

Do you now consider yourself to be a full-time writer?

Yeah, I think so. For much of the time I was working on *Cold Mountain* I was a full-time writer. I haven't taught in five or six years at least, and probably will just write for the next few years, anyhow.