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A PERPETUAL OUTSIDER

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JESSE: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson, by Marshall Frady. Random House, 552 pp., \$28.50.

DO YOU MISS the old New Yorker, when the articles went on for page after page, issue after issue? Did you enjoy those multipart profiles that demonstrated how verbose writers can be when they're paid by the word? If so, this book - some of which appeared in the New Yorker in 1992 and earlier this year - is definitely your cup of tea.

Marshall Frady's interest in Jesse Jackson stems in part from his fascination with memorable Southern characters (he's also written books on George Wallace and the Rev. Billy Graham), and in larger part from his own roots as a white South Carolinian who covered the final years of the civil-rights movement for Newsweek. Confessing that he still retains "a certain romanticism about that time and its figures," Frady admits his hope that Jackson's public career "might hold a possibility for some continuation of that immense moral drama of the '60s." Frady began his "six years of tracking about with Jackson" soon after Jackson's remarkable showing in the 1988 Democratic presidential primaries, where he racked up some 7 million votes before being bested by Michael Dukakis. Frady has enjoyed a level of personal access to Jackson that makes for some wonderfully impressive firsthand reporting, but that quality comes at a price: Frady has grown so close to Jackson and his insights into the man are freighted with such empathy that Jackson's worst sins (remember "Hymietown"?) appear to shrink into relative insignificance.

But "Jesse" does not ignore its subject's least redeeming character traits. Frady duly notes Jackson's "tireless, almost abject desperation for media notice," his "propensity for histrionic self-dramatizing" and "his compulsion to cast himself as the central player in some unfolding historic moral saga." Frady relies overmuch on interviews with a modest number of Jackson intimates and former aides, but he doesn't shy away from acknowledging even those friends' critical observations; former journalist Roger Wilkins, who often has been something of an older brother to Jackson, admits that "I just wish sometimes that he would not need recognition as much as he does."

Frady returns repeatedly to the theme that Jackson is an "outsider" who feels unable to surmount that barrier no matter what celebrity or stature he attains. That psychological snare is in part racial (Frady acknowledges Jackson's "old, pained fixation of racial aggrievement"), but Frady also sees it as inescapably rooted in the circumstances of Jackson's birth and early

upbringing as the illegitimate son of a 16 year old and an older, married family man who lived next door.

Frady has done insufficient work on Jackson's early-adult beginnings as a junior aide to Martin Luther King Jr. and on Jackson's subsequent emergence as a local activist in Chicago during the 1970s. But Frady's portrait of the mature Jackson who ran for president both in 1984 and 1988 is richly valuable, though many readers will find Frady's sometimes repetitious reportage on Jackson's subsequent travels both unilluminating and tedious.

Buried amid Frady's accounts of various trips and speeches, however, are some riveting segments, the finest of which may be a poignant description of a 1988 Jackson visit to a Greenville, S.C., pool hall that had become the living resting place of a good number of Jackson's onetime schoolmates. Of similar journalistic quality, though tacked on awkwardly at the end of the book, is Frady's enthralling account of Jackson's 1990 trip to Baghdad, Iraq, to win the release of Western hostages taken captive at the time of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

Jackson is often an incisive social critic. He'll acknowledge frankly that "we're suffering in the African-American community from a kind of internal destructive syndrome"; in retrospect, his 1992 verdict on the character of Bill Clinton seems all the more insightful four years later: "There's nothin' he won't do. He's immune to shame. Move past all the nice posturing and get down there in him, and you find absolutely nothing . . . nothing but an appetite."

Nowadays, Frady laments, Jackson appears to be "a marginal figure" suffering from "a media eclipse." Once a man whose every utterance commanded national attention, Jackson is now "increasingly given to stray, darkening ruminations" that seem to reflect an inability to accept either his achievements or his limitations. "So much of what we see now as acting in the main events of our day is really, in history, just a comma, a parenthesis," Jackson told one Chicago audience. "Trying to battle cynicism," he tells Frady privately, is "the most terrible battle of all."

Asked recently by the Chicago Sun-Times what he thought of Frady's book, Jackson revealingly replied that "if this were a black writer, people would have said it was too soft." Jackson's assumption that such a sympathetic portrait will seem more credible when written by someone white may well be accurate, but it doesn't change the verdict here: Marshall Frady has produced an insightful portrait, but "Jesse" isn't the comprehensively researched critical biography that Jackson undeniably deserves.

GRAPHIC: **Newsday** file color photo by Ari Mintz- Jesse Jackson campaigning for the presidency in 1988