

MEMORY AND THE FLOW OF TIME

a review by Terry Roberts

Charles Frazier. *Varina: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.

TERRY ROBERTS is the editor of the Gale Group's Literary Masterpieces volume on *Look Homeward, Angel* and a former editor of the *Thomas Wolfe Review*. His literary criticism includes *Self and Community in the Fiction of Elizabeth Spencer* (Louisiana State University Press, 1994). He has written for *NCLR* often, including on John Ehle and Elizabeth Spencer. Read his tribute to Ehle and a review of his latest novel in this issue.

CHARLES FRAZIER received critical acclaim for his debut novel, *Cold Mountain* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), which earned him the 1997 National Book Award and Sir Walter Raleigh Award. He also received the Raleigh Award in 2012 for his third novel, *Nightwoods* (Random House, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013). *Varina* is the 2018 recipient of the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award, given by the Western North Carolina Historical Association. Read an essay on and a review of *Cold Mountain* in *NCLR* 1999, an essay by Frazier about the film adaptation of *Cold Mountain* in *NCLR* 2012, two interviews with him in *NCLR* 2013, and an essay on the opera *Cold Mountain* in *NCLR* 2017.

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Just over halfway through Charles Frazier's new novel, a middle-aged black man asks the title character, who is in her eightieth year, what she is most afraid to lose, and the following exchange ensues:

--Nothing of course, V says.

James recasts his question.

He asks, What do you want to maintain?

--Memory, even if it's sometimes false.

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The exchange between James Blake and Varina Davis is easily lost within this large and complex narrative, but it is vitally important. In many ways, Charles Frazier's new novel – his fourth – is a 353-page meditation on time and memory. It is a fictional memoir based closely on the life of a real woman – Varina Howell Davis, the wife of President Jefferson Davis of the Confederate States of America.

Varina is like Frazier's first two novels, the National Book Award Winner *Cold Mountain* and *Thirteen Moons*, in that it follows with some fidelity the course of historical events. In particular, it is similar to *Thirteen Moons* in that it provides an extended study of one historical individual. In the case of *Thirteen Moons*, Frazier fictionalized the life of William Holland Thomas, the

poor, indentured white boy who becomes an honorary member of the Cherokee Nation and eventually the Chief who helps save the Eastern Band of the Cherokee from deportation to the West. In the case of *Varina*, Frazier spins his tale from the life of Varina Davis, an equally fascinating figure who, like Thomas, cuts across social and cultural boundaries.

If you had a delicious sense of irony, you could place a copy of Jeff Davis's memoirs on your bookshelf next to Frazier's new novel. The historical Varina Davis finished her husband's memoir after his death, and Frazier has now finished the cycle by writing her memoir, a narrative in which the fictional Varina constantly muses on the unreliability of memory – anyone's memory – as it strives to recreate the past. Frazier's version of Varina Davis's life is told through seven conversations that take place on seven Sundays in 1906 – between the aging Varina and James Blake, a black man who tracks her down after discovering that he himself was part of her past.

Although he barely remembers it, Blake as a child was Jimmy Limber, a boy that Varina had taken in

ABOVE Charles Frazier signing copies of *Varina* alongside NCLR Editor Margaret Bauer at the North Carolina Humanities Council John Tyler Caldwell Award for the Humanities ceremony and OPPOSITE RIGHT NCLR Fiction Editor Liza Wieland interviewing Charles Frazier for the ceremony program, Chapel Hill, 5 Oct. 2018

off the streets of Richmond during the Civil War and raised with her own children. In telling him the story, she is filling in the details of his childhood while simultaneously narrating various parts of her own autobiography. They are each making meaning out of their lives through the telling, especially when they challenge each other's assumptions about the past and what it might have meant.

In particular, Blake pushes back on Varina's notions about life before the war – how at various times, “we all took care of each other,” meaning both blacks and whites living on some few Southern plantations in a kind of antebellum innocence. Blake is clear that the slaves on those plantations only let the white masters – even so kind and sensitive a one as Varina – know what they wanted them to know, and so they create a fiction out of the horror of slavery. Varina is forced to reconsider her own life even as she is telling it, and as a result, guilt becomes a prevalent secondary theme in the novel. Varina is clear about her belief that the South deserved to lose the war and should have been punished for its crimes, something that enraged white Southerners about the his-

torical Varina Davis as well as Frazier's fictional “V.”

Even so, the idea of the unconscious nature of privilege – whether that privilege is based on skin color, class, or economic power – is explored at length in this novel, and James Blake acts as a constant reminder, both to Varina as a narrator and to us as readers, of the narrowness of our point of view. This interplay of perspective and memory is a powerful blend of ingredients, especially as the axle (Frazier's word) of the memoir is the long and involved story of Varina's flight with her children following the collapse of the Confederacy and the fall of Richmond. Her children include Jimmy Limber, so she is filling in gaps in his story as she recounts her own, and their escape, along with a few retainers and servants, is as full of dramatic incident as Inman's long march home in *Cold Mountain*.

For this reason, *Varina* may well be Frazier's most accomplished novel to date. Although it lacks the emotional impact of the closing chapters of *Cold Mountain*, it is full of character and drama, and the whole is overlaid with ambiguous meditations on time and memory.

It is a novel of ideas in the form of a fictional memoir. Furthermore, the structure of the book – a series of dialogues between an elderly woman of privilege and an inquisitive black man – gives those ideas a dramatic presence.

If there are legitimate criticisms to be leveled at *Varina*, they have to do with the design that Frazier has created. The one inescapable problem is pointed out by Varina herself: all memoirs end the same way, with the death of the subject, which is not necessarily a compelling event. But this is a small complaint given the weight and ambition of this book.

In the final analysis, *Varina* is an important novel in every respect. It explores fundamental questions about the human condition and does so through fascinating characters portrayed against a stunningly dramatic backdrop. Furthermore, it is characterized from the first page to the last by Frazier's customary lyricism and seemingly effortless historical detail. Given what he has accomplished here, it is time to stop referring to Charles Frazier as the award-winning author of *Cold Mountain* and begin lauding him as the creator of *Varina*. ■

