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## on Frederick Exley

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*John O'Neill*

## OF PLACES THAT NEVER WERE

### PAGES FROM A COLD ISLAND

By Frederick Exley

Random House, 1975, \$7.95

This is a journey through the various drunken landscapes that contained the presence of Frederick Exley in 1972. A little background: Exley's first novel, *A Fan's Notes*, was published in 1968. By many accounts, it was one of the strongest statements to come out of the Sixties. Although it was not a big seller, it did receive several prizes and was nominated for the National Book Award. In *A Fan's Notes*, a "fictional memoir," Exley takes the reader a long painful way through the mind of a man who is always perilously close to destruction. In that book he relates a series of unfortunate involvements with his father, his wife, various lovers, jobs, and the omnipresent bottle. Besides the fact that it is a great book, *A Fan's Notes* must be recognized for the courage it took to write. To quote

James Dickey: "This is the horrible account of a long failure, but a failure which turns into success: the success that this book is."

With *Pages From a Cold Island*, Exley immediately dispels any illusion the reader might be willing to entertain that this is another "fictional memoir" by informing us, in an introductory note, that this is a work of non-fiction. On the dust cover we are also told that this should be considered the middle leg of an autobiographical trilogy; that the final stand has already found title in *Last Notes From Home*.

*Pages From a Cold Island* begins with Exley discovering that Edmund Wilson, the literary critic, has just died at his home not far from where Exley is staying with his mother in a Thousand Islands resort village in upstate New York. Exley is a Wilson devotee from way back and, although he never met Wilson, the knowledge of the critic's passing on has sufficient impact to cause Exley to initiate an amazing tirade against various members of the news media for what he righteously considers to be slights against the memory of Wilson. He then goes off on a four page rampage against Ben Gazzara for being what Exley terms "a sentimental McGovernite;" Annette Funicello for growing tits; Patty Duke for backing Humphrey; finally getting back to Wilson with another three page rave directed at Walter Cronkite for mispronouncing "Hecate" when referring to Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County*.

Exley is in a dilemma in *Pages From a Cold Island* and he is the first to admit it. Early on we read:

Because of the autobiographical and confessional character of *A Fan's Notes*—what Edward Hoagland writing in the *Sunday Times* called "a splurging of personal history"—I knew from both my late editor and my agent (she told me this to prompt me into proving the experts wrong) that on those very infrequent occasions when my name came up at all I was summarily and disparagingly dismissed as having "shot my wad". . .

In his own words, Exley expresses a good part of the problem in *Pages From a Cold Island*. Very rarely does this book achieve the intensity of *A Fan's Notes*.

We are told early in the book that Exley already has the first draft—almost five hundred pages—sequestered in the trunk of his rusting Nova on Singer Island, off the Florida coast. He considers this first attempt "unrelievedly desolate" and decides that a good interview with Gloria Steinem is just what the book needs to brighten it up a little. Steinem is a woman for whom Exley entertains feelings that run from contempt to lust. This bizarre interview, along with a

couple of sexual reminiscences, are combined to make Chapters Six and Seven high points in the novel. Exley recounts his early education that came from listening to the older boys impart their expertise on the street corners of Watertown, N.Y.:

Dong had an absolute passion for what he called the button or the man in the boat. Looking straight ahead but aware of our vacuous breathless attention, Dong told us if we really desired to drive women mad the thing to do was get the clitoris—Dong never of course called it anything as grand as that—between the front teeth and ever so tenderly roll it back and forth between the jaws. Letting his cowl-like brown eyes fall dementedly cross-eyed to the bridge of his tanned nose, as one loonily hypnotized or demonically in thrall to the urgency of his art, Dong made his tenderly gnashing motion and in dumb hilarious imitation we all followed suit!

Exley then goes on to describe his first love affair, with Gretchen, when he was a sophomore at USC. But, on to the interview with Steinem. He gets right to the heart of the matter:

“One of those articles said you had small boobs. You aren’t too grand in the fucking jug department, are you?”

But I could not pursue this nastiness. Quite angry, Gloria tried to come back with The Movement’s cliché reply. She tried to say, “I wouldn’t ask you how big your prick is, would I?” but, oh Lord, gentle reader, she couldn’t bring it off, she stumbled on the word *prick*, delicately and stutteringly substituted *penis*, the blood rose becomingly in those lovely cheekbones, and I smiled apologetically and thought, and I was sincere, *I like this girl. I really do like this girl.*

Exley is of the breed of male chauvinist pig. Needless to say, the interview does not go well.

The last part of the novel deals chiefly with Exley’s in-depth study of the final days of Edmund Wilson. He arranges an interview with Wilson’s secretary and protégée in his last years, and has a series of stormy encounters with Wilson’s daughter. If you were unaware of the inside dope on Wilson before, then, by the time you finish the book, you may know more than you ever cared to.

The final adventure Exley takes us on before he once more retreats to the sterility of his cold Florida island is to Iowa City and a one-semester’s stint as guest lecturer with the University of Iowa’s Writers’ Workshop. Of his stay there we learn that his overriding goal is to have a “last fling with young flesh.” While there he sports a silver-handled walking stick he claims was Edmund Wilson’s. He eventually discontinues this practice because the walking stick actually had belonged to his own great-grandfather Champ.

Although Exley does occasionally shine in *Pages From a Cold Island*, I finished the book wishing he had waited; had more last flings; anything rather than coming out with this book before it was ready. My thoughts keep going back to the rough draft that isn't working—the first attempt—that resides in the trunk of the rusting Nova throughout the novel. I have the feeling he's hiding the real thing from us. Ex has me hooked. I'm waiting expectantly for *Last Notes From Home*, but, at the same time, hope it contains something closer to the detailed agony of *A Fan's Notes*, rather than the agony of unimportant detail that this book is so often concerned with.

*William Turner*

