

Father figure: 'New Yorker' humorist gets paternal



Lamentations of the Father: Essays

by Ian Frazier

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By Alyssa Pinsker

“I could never get my father to laugh, so I felt an incredible accomplishment when I did,” said Ian “Sandy” Frazier in a recent telephone interview. At 57, the Thurber Prize-winning comic essayist and longtime New Yorker writer is regarded as one of America’s greatest humorists. His tenth book, *Lamentations of the Father: Essays*, contains 33 short essays, many of which are quintessentially New York as well as laugh-

out-loud funny.

A father of two, Mr. Frazier is also a paternal figure to many in Chelsea, having co-founded a writers’ workshop 14 years ago at the Church of the Holy Apostles, home of the city’s largest soup kitchen. If describing something painful, he said that sometimes his student writers can laugh, although “It takes a moment to readjust, to think that maybe of 10 bad things, the 11th is funny.”

In spite of the comedic slant of his work, Mr. Frazier is no stranger to tragedy. The eldest of five children was reared by a stern chemist father and an amateur actor/schoolteacher mother in Hudson, Ohio, near Norwalk—a town founded by his great-great-great-great grandfather. A motivated student, he attended Western Reserve Academy before going on to study at Harvard, to which he applied “for the challenge.” While in Cambridge, Frazier’s brother died of leukemia.

“Being funny is a great consolation when you’re in the too-close presence of death,” he said. “There’s a defiance to humor that makes you feel like you put one over on death somehow. Even though, of course, in the long run you really haven’t. But the fact that the joke’s ultimately on you doesn’t make it less funny.”

The loss motivated him to write about his family in his ambitious and best-selling memoir simply titled, *Family*. Years later, he found inspiration for *Lamentations of the Father* in the Old Testament. “The Bible lists certain insects you can eat,” he said. “It seemed ridiculous.” The title essay utilizes language similar to that in Deuteronomy, proffering laws for parental authority such as “Neither raise up your knees, nor place your feet upon the table, for that is an abomination to me.”

“Fathers are a joke now, and they didn’t used to be,” said Mr. Frazier. “There aren’t very many grown-ups in the United States. Most people in authority are just grown kids. Look at Bush.” In reference to the Bible, he noted, “Look at God. Back in the day, there were

stern fathers who were afraid of God. Now fathers are powerless, and people aren't afraid of God anymore."

Frazier counts himself as a non-adult, but he was raised God-fearing. An Episcopalian, he practices in "a wave between doubt and faith," having been encouraged by fatherhood to make a decision. "If you have kids, you have to have some kind of answer." His daughter, 19, a freshman, recently tried out for the Harvard Lampoon, where her father wrote in college. Choosing to follow in his literary footsteps makes Frazier proud, "If she decided to be a writer, I'd take that as a compliment."

After graduating from Harvard, Frazier hitchhiked to New York, later moving to Brooklyn with his wife, writer Jacqueline Carey, whom he met at the New Yorker. When researching his 1989 book, *Great Plains*, Frazier and Carey moved with their daughter and son to Montana, finally heading back East to settle in Montclair, New Jersey, where he currently resides.

In Montana, Frazier began to consider a later essay advertising life from the point of view of a crow. "If you were a spotted nap-weed, wouldn't you want to say that the climate is great, and you never want to move?"

The collection as a whole invokes laughter with wildlife anthropomorphizing in "Tomorrow's Bird" and traipses into satire on unhappy domesticity "The Cursing Mommy Cookbook" and "The Cursing Mommy Christmas." Frazier then veers into ribald territory with the curiously named "Chinese Arithmetic," an essay in the form of a medical log detailing his own embarrassing erections and ends the book with "What I Am," based on his dishwashing method (meaning: no method), which his wife lovingly declared "idiocy." Mr. Frazier disagreed, taking a jab at the politically correct rhetoric of the time, arguing he was, instead, "a sufferer of idiocy." During the interview, he added a postscript in his characteristic self-deprecating humor, "As it turns out, my dishwashing method might have shown idiocy."

Though it took him 11 years to publish his first book, writing for the New Yorker played an invaluable role in shaping his comic writing. Even more than his father, "making New Yorker readers—sophisticated folks—laugh is a tough accomplishment." And getting that laugh from readers, said Mr. Frazier, is "irreducible. Either you succeed or you fail."

In the case of his new book—and despite his lamentable dishwashing skills—he has once again succeeded.

Ian Frazier will read from and discuss his book, on June 24, 8 p.m. at the National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South. Free.