

Feature

Although he's wheelchair-bound, his creative expression has no limits

By CHRIS CAIN
Staff Writer

Michael Jordan pounds hardwood floors and dunks basketballs for a living. Reynolds Price earns his keep by sitting very still for hours on end in his home in the quiet woods of Durham County. Most days find him in his wheelchair from 9:30 a.m. and working into the night, often until midnight. Sitting and writing.

Price has been writing with varying degrees of success since eighth grade and he shows no signs of tiring. In fact, he says, not only does he enjoy it now more than ever, but he's also getting better at it.

"It's like anything else in the world — you do learn a lot if you've been doing it for 40 or 35 years. I don't have nearly the problems I did as a very young writer." Critics and the public seem also to have fewer problems with Price. His most recent novel, *Kate Vaiden*, has achieved bestseller status and received coast to coast praise, winning the National Book Critics Circle Award and gaining a front page spot on the New York Times Book Review.

Having achieved a good measure of fame after 14 books, scores of short stories and hundreds of poems, Price counsels young writers to train as rigorously as the muscular Mr. Jordan.

"Learn how to manage your talent just as much as a professional athlete. Your talent in many ways is comparable to the talent of a professional athlete. Your brain does your work for you and you have to learn how to manage your brain just as you have to learn how to manage your kidneys or your liver."

Price manages his words carefully, slowly, with a deep, rich voice. He trained that voice with weekly lessons while in high school at Raleigh's Broughton High School. Now he trains his mind, both the conscious and unconscious. "The young writer's biggest task and most difficult challenge is learning to relax and trust the unconscious, and train it to be something to work cooperatively with you and not against you."

Price says he believes that some of America's most famous authors unfortunately have not learned to manage themselves consciously or unconsciously. "One of the tragedies of American literature is that writers have tended to burn out early and die early. The great novelists of the 20s and 30s of America — every single one of them — was a fallen

down alcoholic, and they all ended up burning themselves out or committing suicide by the time they were 60. Certainly their best work was done by the time they were 40 — Wolfe, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald. That's tragic, that's appalling, that should never have been. They're responsible to a large extent for managing their careers as badly and as wastefully as they did."

Today, athletes Edwin Moses and Ben Johnson continue to break physical records, to push the human body to new limits. And, in the same manner, Price says, writers are reaching new heights. "I think there are writers in America now who are better than anybody we've ever had before — better than Melville, Hawthorne, Faulkner."

He also believes American fiction to be the cream of the world's crop. "It's a country of such tremendous cultural diversity, for the same reason that we call it the melting pot. I think American writers in the best sense of the word are the most sophisticated writers that have ever written. They know more about more kinds of human thinking than anyone else who's ever written. And that's, I think, just the simple truth of it, though it's an outrageous claim."

Simple truths are Price's forte. To aspiring writers he says plainly, "There is absolutely no way that someone is going to become a good writer until he or she has read thousands of good pieces of whatever it is he or she wants to do — fiction, poetry, or drama."

With words that taste of his written prose he describes the South as "a fascinating, kind of fertilizing place. ... It's a very intense kind of place. It's a place that people really can love and really can hate. I never heard anyone say that about Kansas or Oklahoma." Except for the three years of study he spent at Oxford University in England, Price has lived his entire life in North Carolina,

writing and teaching since 1958 at Duke, his Alma Mater.

Kate Vaiden was written in large part while the author was recovering from cancer, a bout which has left him confined to a wheelchair. The book is a departure for him not only in that it was written in first person, but also because that person is a woman. He said that such "cross-gender" writing was not as difficult as one might expect. "It's a simple explanation — boys are reared by women, so boys acquire by osmosis throughout their childhood an enormous amount of emotional interior knowledge of women. One of the things that I've liked most about all the reviews and the mail about the book is that no single woman has accused me of getting it wrong."

Those in Hollywood also seem to think Price has gotten it right. He has sold the movie rights to *Kate Vaiden* and a screenplay has been written. He says he has no qualms about mixing media in such a manner, nor a fear of failure. "If a bad film is made of it, so what? Most films are bad films. There are bad movies of a lot of great books. No one has stopped reading *War and Peace* because there's a bad movie of it."

Similarly, he is not worried about the influence of success or the temptation to rest on his laurels. "In my case it's made me just want to work harder and do better." He is also happy about another aspect of success — the notion that people will read his work after his death. "I don't have any genetic children, but I have all these far more satisfactory children." He pauses, laughing. "Who can't get arrested and can't get addicted to drugs, or wreck cars, or knock up girls?"

Price has had a long and fertile career, and if his most recent efforts are any indication, he can expect to have an ever-growing family in the future.

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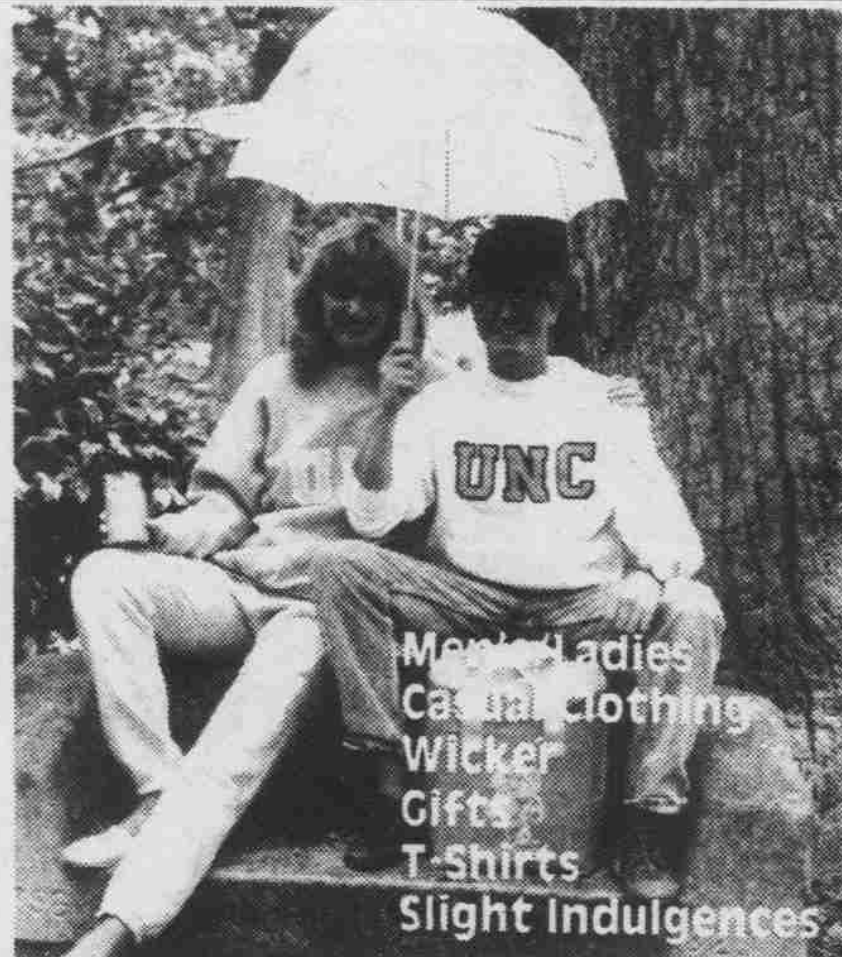
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