

Tale of family history stuck in past

Pulitzer Prize-winning UNC alumnus Jonathan Yardley pays tribute to his parents, Helen and Bill Yardley, in his book, "Our Kind of People: The Story of an American Family." Yardley, book critic and columnist for The Washington Post, relives the major events as well as the day to day happenings in the lives of his parents with the book. But while he records these events in great detail, he leaves many questions unanswered.

Yardley begins the story of his parents with the birth of his father, William Woolsey Yardley, on Sept. 7, 1911, and the birth of Helen Marie Gregory on Nov. 22, 1913. Yardley surrounds the tale of the two births with commentary on the numerous families that framed the background of the two births: the Gregoryses, Ingersolls, Woolseys and, of course, the Yardleys.

Some of this commentary is quite interesting, such as the family tale of Helen's grandfather, Orville Ingersoll, who at 7 years old stuck a willow switch in the ground of the family settlement at Delta, Mich., only to witness the switch later grow into a tree. However, the influx of names and family stories often hinders the reader and distracts from the story.

Yardley relates the story of his parents as they move from town to town and as Bill changes from headmaster of one private school to another, culminating with Bill accepting the headmaster position at Chatham Hall in Virginia, a private school for girls.

He gives the reader a detailed account of the years the Yardley family spent in Virginia, complete with accounts of the family expenses and the day-to-day activities of Bill's job. This amount of detail can be tedious at times, but it gives the reader a sense of the couple as two individ-

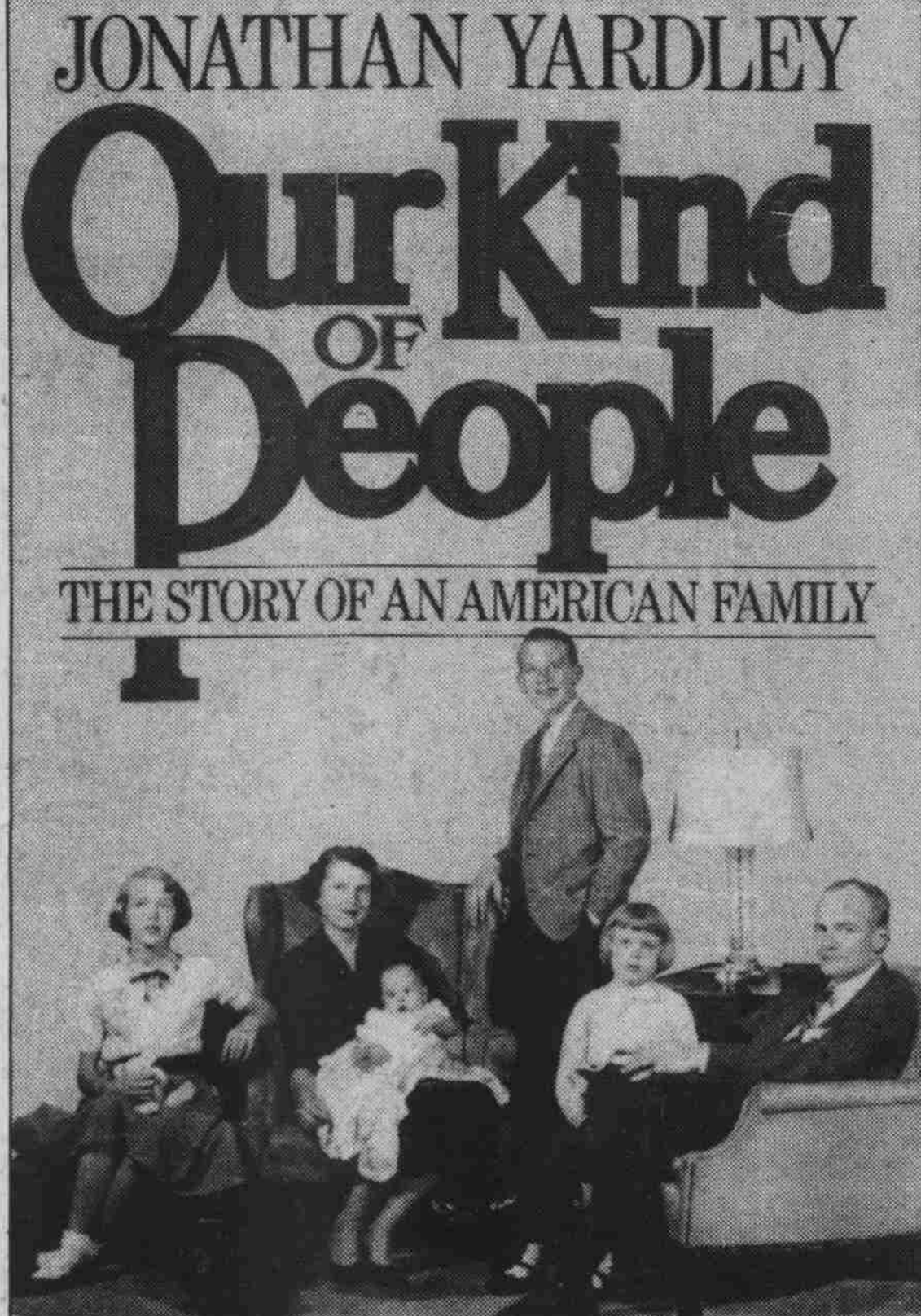
Glenn O'Neal
Book

uals rather than as a unit. For example, Yardley goes into great detail over the extreme diligence Bill displayed in collecting books for his private library. For many years, Bill spent most of his spare time finding the books, cataloging them and making protective slips for his collection. Such details give the reader insight into the true character of Bill Yardley.

Overall, the book reads well except for the long passages where Yardley becomes obsessed with genealogy. The family history is nonessential and tends to slow the pace of the book.

Another weakness of the book is that Yardley introduces many family members into the story, but doesn't tie them together in any fashion. He mentions their relationship to Bill and Helen but not to each other. For instance, Jonathan describes the conflict between Bill and his daughter Sarah over her "different" lifestyle, but he doesn't explain how the other children view the conflict. He portrays the family members as puppets whose actions are results of their relationship with their parents. Few if any families act this way, and this family setup is another barrier to the reader.

The book's main value is not actually the story itself but rather the historical and sociological trends traced in it. The Yardleys are not your typical middle-class family, but they are an excellent example of an upper-middle class family that is continuously trying to find its place in society. The Yardley family is kept at arm's length by the upper class because of its less than extensive income, and the family



members distance themselves from the lower and middle classes because of their comfortable lifestyle. The result is that the family lives some-

High aims pay off for UNC alumnus Jonathan Yardley

By JESSICA YATES
Assistant Arts Editor

There is sometimes a difference between being a superior writer and a successful journalist. UNC alumnus and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jonathan Yardley chose to make excellence rather than success his goal and has never looked back.

The former Daily Tar Heel editor has worked for such newspapers as The New York Times and The Miami Herald and is currently employed at the Washington Post. He has also written two books, the second of which has recently been published.

Yardley entered UNC in 1957 after graduating from a New England boarding school. He majored in English, as he believes "every aspiring journalist should," and took only one journalism course during his college career. The DTH provided an outlet for his inclination to write. He joined the staff as a freshman and was a columnist by his sophomore year.

"I was notorious for writing about the time my dog gave birth to a litter of puppies under my desk," he said. "The story had extremely vivid detail that made a lot of girls really squeamish."

In the spring of his junior year, Yardley was elected DTH editor. With the Kennedy-Nixon presidential race, the scandal over the suspected gambling habits of then-UNC basketball coach Frank McGuire and the activities of the civil rights movement, "it was an exciting year to cover," he said.

During the spring of Yardley's senior year, James Reston, then the chief of The New York Times Washington bureau, came to UNC to speak. "I couldn't attend the lecture, but I went to the question-and-answer session and talked with him," Yardley said. Reston called him the next day to offer him a yearlong internship.

Following his internship, Yardley wrote for The New York Times in its week in review magazine. He and his family moved to North Carolina in 1964, where Yardley immediately started working for The Greensboro Daily News.

He was awarded a Nieman Fellowship in 1968. The award is given to about 12 journalists around the country and allows them to go to Harvard to study anything they want for a year.

"I studied American fiction," Yardley said, "and when I came back, my interest was a lot stronger in the literary aspects of writing."

For several years, Yardley freelanced book reviews for publications such as The New York Times and Life magazine. He took a job in 1974 as book editor of The Miami Herald. During this period he wrote and published his first book, "Ring: A Biography of Ring Lardner." Lardner was a famous writer of short stories and a sports columnist in the 1920s.

Yardley joined The Washington Star in 1978 as its new book editor and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1981 for literary criticism.

His next job, which he still holds, was with the Washington Post. "I write book reviews and a column about social and cultural subjects," he said. Both of his sons attended UNC: Jim graduated in 1986 and William is a member of the class of 1989.

His gradual transformation from news reporter to literary journalist may seem surprising, but, according to Yardley, it can easily be explained. "I grew up in a family with a long tradition in the appreciation of books and literature. My parents took it very seriously."

"I discovered in college that the one thing I could do well is write." Although he received very little training in journalism, "in those days, newspapers were willing to take someone not necessarily trained in journalism but trained in themselves," he said.

"I always gravitated to tiny corners of journalism where writing skill was valued more than reporting skill, which is a talent I really don't have. But I admire people who can do it well."

Yardley will be in North Carolina for three days this week to talk about his new book, "Our Kind of People: The Story of an American Family."



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