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phantom's
return
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A memoir filled with joy

Aging N.C. writer revisits his youthful adventures at Oxford, his journey home

by Pam Kelley . The Charlotte Observer

DURHAM — In a world crowded with memoirs recounting every sort of human trial, Reynolds Price's new book, "Ardent Spirits," stands out because of what it's not.

It's not a tale of adversity or pain or loss. It is, like its author, full of stories funny and wise. The book brings alive a time in post-World War II England when a promising young scholar could have coffee with poet W.H. Auden, then run into J.R.R. Tolkien as he strolled to the bus stop.

Price, 76, has taught English at Duke University, his alma mater, for 51 years. He has published more than three dozen books, won awards, been inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

He has also survived spinal cancer, though the treatment that saved his life in the mid-'80s left him in a wheelchair, a paraplegic, dependent on live-in assistants.

Now, North Carolina's venerable man of letters returns to some of the most colorful years in his life — from 1955, when he begins studies as a Rhodes scholar, to 1961, when he completes his first novel, "A Long and Happy Life." The book, out Tuesday, is getting good reviews. James Schiff, author of "Understanding Reynolds Price," calls it Price's most compelling work since his award-winning 1986 novel, "Kate Vaiden."

On a recent spring afternoon, Price took a break in his Duke office between classes. That

day, he taught a class on John Milton and finished his daily physical therapy, required to stimulate blood circulation in his legs. Later,

little more depressed than I am, but I can't quite manage it."

He crossed his legs — grabbing a pants leg, lifting, resting ankle on opposite knee — and explained why he wrote his new memoir: "I had loved those years of my life so much."

A new life at Oxford

"Ardent Spirits" begins in 1955 as a 22-year-old Price, N.C. born and bred, says goodbye to his widowed mother and brother, boards an ocean liner and heads to England.

Once there, he moves into Merton College and finds, to his dismay, that 40 degrees constitutes a reasonably warm

room in mid-winter Britain. He invests in sweaters and spends huge amounts to run a space heater, causing a friend

to quip that he's growing orchids and iguanas.

"My prodigality kept me at least from perishing of cold," he writes, "and I took a certain pleasure in being something of an outrageous college pet — the Man Who Craves Heat."

"Ardent Spirits" is full of such gems, evocative stories about friends, professors and his landlady, Win, whose colorful expressions would provide Price rich material for his fiction. (When Price once commented on a homely woman, Win quipped:



Reynolds Price speaks at a 2007 ceremony awarding him the Thomas Wolfe Prize at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

Photo Credit: Allie Mullin/UNC Department of English and Comparative Literature

he would teach a seminar on the gospels of Mark and John.

Nearby, Price's assistant, a recent Duke graduate, waited until needed.

Each year Price hires a new assistant, making it clear the job will last only 12 months "so they don't get trapped in some old man's illness and heartbreak."

Price lives with physical pain. But despite the pain, the wheelchair and his quip about heartbreak, he's a man with a glass-half-full disposition, full of gratitude and good cheer.

"I love to laugh, love my friends, my family," he said. "There are times when I try to get a

"Well you don't look at the mantel while you're poking the fire, now do you?")

Through connections, location and luck, Price also runs into famous people regularly. Brigitte Bardot turns up in front of him in a movie theater. The room he rents from his landlady is just down the road from Tolkien's house.

British writer Sir Stephen Spender accompanies him to a 1957 production of "Titus Andronicus," starring Vivien Leigh and husband Laurence Olivier. Afterward, as they greet Leigh backstage, she encourages them to say hello to Larry, still in his dressing room. They knock, and one of world's great actors opens the door, "naked as jay."

Like "Clear Pictures," a memoir of his childhood, and "A Whole New Life," the story of his cancer and recovery, Price's new book benefits from his potent memory for conversations and details.

Price isn't a journal keeper, but when he checked recollections against letters he sent his mother during his Oxford years, he found only tiny discrepancies. This cheered him, he said, because he remembers the scandal over James Frey's memoir fabrications in "A Million Little Pieces."

"Oprah had made such a deal about that guy a few years ago, I thought, 'Don't tell a single lie. You'll get caught.'"

A 'fervent erotic relation'

In "Ardent Spirits," Price also writes about being a gay man, though he prefers the term "queer."

He held off until now, he said, because "I wanted to be very careful about not invading
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