

MISFIT: The Strange Life of Frederick Exley
by Jonathan Yardley

Frederick Exley, the chronically bibulous subject of this unexpectedly affecting biography, was a self-absorbed jangle of nerves that were matter-of-factly exposed by their insouciant owner to the fascination or horror of all who encountered him.

Capable of exerting a hold on people and endowed with an outrageous sense of entitlement, Exley was larger than life and largely deceitful in relationships whenever he encountered difficulties – which was often. Still, he managed to produce “A Fan’s Notes” in 1968 – a “fictional memoir” of his failed life. Three decades after its publication the book remains in print, is taught in university courses, and has had an enviable number of prominent champions.

One of these is Jonathan Yardley, the Pulitzer Prize-winning book critic for the Washington Post. In “Misfit,” Yardley has undertaken to explain what was so singular about Fred Exley, whose literary persona he rates as a great American character, up there with Huckleberry Finn. Laying out the facts of the tortured existence Exley himself described as a “long malaise,” Yardley poises between esteem and disapproval.

A-bare-bones summary of that life goes something like this: Fred Exley was born in Watertown, New York, a bleak upstate town characterized by freezing weather and a WASP ruling elite that employed the town’s factory workers and laborers. The stunted lives of men like Exley began and usually ended in blue collar saloons.

Fred’s father was a local sporting legend, reputed to have been the best athlete ever to come out of the region. Earl Exley’s son, as young Fred was known, could not begin to approach his father’s athletic feats, though he persevered at sports in high school and was competent.

Early on, Fred turned completely inward except when he was drinking, whereupon he turned crude and wittily wounding according to the many witnesses whose testimony Yardley collected. Exley had trouble when he was sober as well.

Women for Exley were vessels of two kinds: long-legged Ivy League Holy Grails never to be actually encountered or despised receptacles through whom he indulged his childish whims. Twice

he was remanded to mental institutions, where electroshock treatment was employed to curb his alcoholism. He married twice and was divorced both times by patient, loving wives who left reluctantly. His especially doting mother took Fred in on the frequent occasions he had nowhere else to go. His friends – and Exley never lacked for them – advanced him money with the full knowledge it would not be repaid.

Then, miraculously, like a phoenix rising from its own ashes, Exley stopped drinking long enough to compose in palimpsest form the story of his first 35 years. Rereading “A Fan’s Notes,” one is taken by its utter candor, its stylistic *éclat*, and the ingenious nature of Exley’s narrative device. Transferring the impossible hero worship he never stopped feeling for his father onto real-life football star Frank Gifford, with whom Exley attended the University of Southern California (they did not know each other), the narrator is able to zero in on the emotional impact of what being a spectator entails, and to intuit what Yardley shrewdly understands as its “metaphoric and self-aggrandizing possibilities.”

In the real world a fantasizing Exley cheers Gifford on from his bar stool in tones approaching lunacy, fully aware of the ridiculous character of his ardor. As Yardley points out: “The honesty of the book verges on the terrible. No one was ever harder on Fred Exley than Fred Exley himself. Each of his faults is isolated, explored, magnified. He does not let himself get away with anything.”

Though they never met in person, Exley contacted Yardley after the latter praised “A Fan’s Notes” in a national magazine article. Thus began what for Fred was a common practice – boozy phone calls that he similarly made to what must have been hundreds of other people. According to Yardley: “Exley simply wanted to talk; he did not want to listen.”

In the literary bar of Exley’s choice, the Lion’s Head in Greenwich Village, Yardley tells us the bartenders routinely left the phone of the hook when Fred telephoned and went about their business while he slurred on.

Two unsuccessful books followed “A Fan’s Notes.” The biographer correctly concludes that Exley was a one-book writer who squeezed all that he had or ever would have into his first book. He was, as someone cruelly put it, a downwardly-mobile man.

Self-defeated, Exley would drink himself to death a quarter-century after the publication of “A Fan’s Notes.” It proved to be a

long, anticlimactic dying. The terrible irony is that while Frederick Exley failed in life, his book lives on as the inspired work and cautionary tale it remains

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