Ian Frazier combines an historian's discipline with an original comic mind.

By Craig Lambert

In late 1945, when David Frazier, a freshly minted Ph.D. in chemistry, went home to Ohio on leave from the navy, he interviewed for a job with the chemical research department of Standard Oil of Ohio, known as Sohio. He had to take a psychological test that asked, “What is your ultimate ambition in life?” Frazier’s response was, “To drink up all the beer in the world.” The Sohio department head later recalled, “I thought that was a good answer from a guy who had just walked off a battleship. We were trying to get inventive people. I believed we would get an invention from him.” This intuition proved sound. Frazier worked as a research scientist for Sohio for the rest of his career and obtained more than a dozen patents.

His eldest son, Ian Frazier ’73, nicknamed Sandy, also has an irreverent sense of humor, but holds only one patent, for a “bag snagger,” a prong-and-hook device attached to a long pole that enables someone on the ground to remove a windblown plastic bag stuck in the bare limbs of a tree, thus dispatching a common urban eyesore. In 2004, Frazier described this singular device, and his adventures in extracting stray bags from trees, in the *New Yorker* magazine. With two old friends, both fellow Midwesterners (one of whom shares the bag-snagger patent), Frazier formed a vigilante group of sorts and cleared arboreal debris in all five New York boroughs, then went afield to Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, and eventually captured renegade bags along the Mississippi and even the Los Angeles River.

“The basic thing that gets in a New York City tree is the white plastic deli bag,” Frazier wrote. “It reaches the tree with the aid of the wind, or (as I sometimes think) by its own power. With its filmy whiteness and its two looped handles, it suggests a self-levitating undershirt; we have named it the undershirt bag. It does not have a soul, but it imitates one, rising and floating on the exhalations of a subway grate like the disembodied spirits that poets used to converse with in Hell. Its prehensile handles cling to any branch that comes within range, and then grab hold for eternity.”

It is hard to imagine any other contemporary American writer discoursing on such a topic, nor logging the years of intermittent fieldwork (or play) behind this essay. Even more unlikely is finding one who could spin a compelling story from such an odd yet mundane pursuit, touching on friendship, urban vistas, environmentalism, litter, wildlife, and patent law. But Frazier “occupies a niche of his own,” says his friend and *New Yorker* colleague Mark Singer. “The word unique gets used loosely or carelessly, but Sandy is truly an original.”

Indeed Frazier, who has written continuously for the *New Yorker* (excepting one notable hiatus) since joining its staff in 1974, holds a place in American letters unlike any other. He ranges from wildly imaginative satires through beat reporting pieces and outdoor writing to long books that plumb the breadth and depth of American history and explore undiscovered reaches of the continent. “He’s one of the last inheritors of the great tradition of the *New Yorker,*” says Jonathan Galassi ’71, president of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, who has edited all of Frazier’s “serious” books. “You can see his roots in someone like A.J. Liebling or John McPhee, though Sandy’s approach is more personal than McPhee’s. The thing most characteristic of his work is a certain intimacy. You find this very idiosyncratic mixture of humor, seriousness, and passion; it all comes out of his personal digestion of everything he’s learned.”

Frazier’s voice has a clear directness, a kind of elegant simplicity long associated with the *New Yorker*. It is a prose style perhaps most readily identified with E.B. White, though it also shines through the poetry of Robert Frost, another plain-spoken New Englander who qualifies as a modernist. “Simplicity is your aesthetic, and it neatly dovetails with modernism,” says Frazier. “I’m a traditionalist in that regard. The arts are conservative: you’re building on what’s already there.”

Many *New Yorker* readers recognize Frazier’s byline from his short humor pieces, collected in *Dating Your Mom* (1986), *Coyote v. Acme* (1996), and the current *Lamentations of the Father*. The latter, for example, includes “Researchers Say,” which informs us that scientists at Duke University have determined that “life is too hard.” The author then straight-facedly ponders scholarly research into life’s futility and frustrations, ranging from death to “the mattress cover, or quilted pad, that goes over the mattress
Ian Frazier holds his patented bag snagger.
before you put on the fitted sheet, and that pops loose from one corner of the mattress in the middle of the night 60 percent of the time, experts say.” In “Veni, Vidi, Vici, Etc.,” an excursion into faux-literary scholarship, Frazier reports that many of history’s pithy sayings are actually sound bites—a more venerable form than previously imagined. The original of “Veni, vidi, vici,” for example, he asserts, was, in translation: “I came, I saw, I conquered, I had a snack, I took a bath, and I went to bed, because I was exhausted.”

In pieces like “Your Face or Mine,” which takes its premise from WE CAN KICK YOUR CITY’S ASS a slogan for New York City that Mayor Giuliani embraced and the New York Daily News offered as a button, Frazier perfectly captures the voice of a hard-bitten New Yorker:

First thing every morning when I sit down to eat, I get in my breakfast’s face. I violate the space of that breakfast—the dry cereal, one-per-cent skim, fruit juice, what have you—I really get loud with it. I tell it what I want it to do for me that day from a nutritional standpoint. Hey, I’m a New Yorker—my food doesn’t give me ulcers, I give it ulcers. Then I eat it. I go at that breakfast one hundred percent. And I don’t care what you’re havin’, eggs over, hash browns, grits like they got down South (grits! what a joke!), my breakfast can kick whatever you’re havin’ ass. It’s not what’s on the plate, it’s the attitude. With the right New York attitude, I can take my breakfast and beat your breakfast, then take your breakfast and beat my breakfast.

A word of warning here, in case you’re thinking that because I get in my breakfast’s face you can just come up and get in my face. Think twice about that, my friend. You want to get in my face, take a number. Let me explain: I’m a New Yorker, so naturally I’m not going to hear you unless you get in my face. In fact, I restrict myself exclusively to in-your-face people, places, and things, because that’s the way I like it. Unfortunately, there’s just one problem. Recently, I measured my face, and I don’t think I’ve got more than about seventy square inches of surface area there. Think about it: not a lot of room. The Daily News gets in my face every morning, and that more than fills my face right there. So I guess, loving this ass-kicking city as I do, what I really need is a hell of a lot bigger face.

Those who have laughed repeatedly at Frazier’s comic genius might be surprised to know that the man himself has a quiet and ease about him; he is shy, polite, patient, the polar opposite of a Robin Williams-style entertainer. At home in Montclair, New Jersey, the blue-eyed, gray-haired author wears jeans and a flannel shirt and works from an office that might belong to a graduate student in history. Last year he walked more than a mile every day, mostly for the exercise, though he once wrote an account of how Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and “Stonewall” Jackson, greatly outnumbered, “made a plan as bold as any in military history,” and ominously detailing a series of miscalculations by Union officers, Frazier describes the regiment’s situation just before Jackson’s attack from the flank:

By late afternoon, the men on the Union right were playing poker in the woods or resting. Some were cooking supper and had their arms stacked...The 55th’s regimental band, in some pines across the road, was playing jaunty airs like “The Girl I Left Behind Me.” Between five o’clock and six, foxes, rabbits, and quail began to break from the woods to the right. Then some deer emerged, and a cheer went down the line as they ran by.

In the next instant, History, that force which always seems to choose people who are richer or poorer or in a different place, caught my relatives and the rest of the 55th
Those who have laughed repeatedly at Frazier’s comic genius might be surprised to know that the man has a quiet and ease about him. He’s the polar opposite of a Robin Williams-style entertainer.

square on the point of the chin. There was a crash of cannon down the road and the loud boom of a shell exploding directly overhead. Fragments of hot iron rained all around. Noncombatants—commissary officers, clerks with armloads of papers, teamsters, officers’ black servants on spare horses—scattered. Bullets began to fly out of the woods, clipping new leaves.

Family is “a great book, an underappreciated book,” says Jonathan Galassi. Even so, many reviewers were quite vocal in their praise. “It is a stunning book,” wrote Geoffrey Stokes in the Boston Sunday Globe, “written in sentences and paragraphs concealing emotional depth charges that explode across the gap from page to reader.” Here is one such depth charge, on the marriage of the aforementioned Frederick Wickham:

Frederick Wickham came to Norwalk one day in the early 1830s and saw Lucy Preston in her yard picking lilies of the valley. She was about eighteen, small, blonde, with sharp blue eyes. Lucy’s mother had died when she was twelve. She ran her father’s household by herself. Frederick was about twenty. The moment he saw Lucy he decided to marry her. Their many descendants would tell different versions of this first encounter. My grandmother, Cora, told me that when she was six years old she saw Frederick lying in his coffin looking fine in his black suit, and holding lilies of the valley in his hand.

Frazier’s bestselling 1989 book Great Plains germinated during a 1,700-mile auto trip the author made from San Antonio, Texas, to West Glacier, Montana, to meet his friend and New Yorker colleague George W. S. Trow ’65. (Frazier was in San Antonio to research his 1983 New Yorker piece on Poncé Cruse Evans, author of the syndicated “Hints from Heloise” newspaper feature, which later became the title piece of Nobody Better, Better Than Nobody, a 1997 collection of essays and profiles.) Mostly, the way you see America is East and West,” Frazier explains; on the road to Montana, he hit on the idea that one could also tell the story of this country on a north-south axis.

The result is a sprawling, ambitious work saturated with the people, history, culture, and above all the feel of this vast prairie. (Frazier himself moved from New York City to Bigfork, Montana, in 1982, staying there until he returned to his loft in lower Manhattan in 1985. Bigfork is west of the Great Plains but was a convenient base for numerous road trips throughout the region.) Great Plains seamlessly mixes stories of Frazier’s own adventures with a nuanced, eclectic history of the area, touching on Lawrence Welk, Crazy Horse, and Mrs. Homer Lang of Turkey, Texas, who told Frazier, “My kids was pretty good-size before I ever got a refrigerator and they was up great big before I ever got an air conditioner.”

The paperback edition of Great Plains has a 211-page main text with 65 pages of notes, and even these make fascinating reading. One note, for example, informs us that

In 1910, C. W. Post, the cereal magnate, began an ambitious rainmaking project on his 200,000 acres of the Texas plains. Post had noticed that in accounts of wars that he had read, heavy rains had always seemed to follow artillery battles. He believed that with enough explosions he could produce rain. He blew off boxcars and boxcars of dynamite around his town of Post City, Texas. The dynamite was laid out on the ground and fired at intervals designed to simulate artillery barrages. Post and his staff kept at it for several years, and produced drizzles and one or two rainstorms, which encouraged him.

“Sandy has the discipline of an historian,” says Singer, “and he’s a truly wonderful historian. He’ll put himself through real physical discomfort to get a fact.” (Frazier’s next big book, Travels in Siberia, due out in a year or two, has involved not only several trips, including a six-week drive across the Siberian swamp and tundra, but also learning to speak and read Russian.) For Great Plains, Frazier returned to the site of Sitting Bull’s cabin in South Dakota to confirm that he had correctly identified some nearby trees as bur oaks. His car got stuck in mud, and Frazier caught a ride to the cabin with some drunken young men who were joy-riding with a supply of beer, throwing empties out the window. Frazier took some leaves off a tree: “Turned out I’d had it right all along.”

For On the Rez (2000), Frazier came to know one of the poorest places in America, the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. To research the book, he moved to Missoula, Montana, in 1995 and stayed until 1999, when he decamped with his family for New Jersey. With an Oglala Sioux friend, Le War Lance, acting as Virgil to his Dante, the author builds a (please turn to page 82)
I was disheartened to read President Faust’s speech made at the ROTC ceremony on June 4 [http://harvardmagazine.com/web/commencement/comm2008]. Implying that our current wars, arguably illegal, “are supporting and defending the United States Constitution,” she glorified military service as the supreme accomplishment of the Emancipation Proclamation and women’s suffrage. Moreover, in an America that now witnesses a resurgence of xenophobia, her assertion that the military has served immigrants as a “foundation for citizenship” gives pause. This amounts to predication of our democratic ideals upon blind obedience to authority, an effacement of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Surely we can do better in our “commitment to the pursuit of truth.”

Ira Braus, Ph.D. ’88
West Hartford, Conn.

AMPLIFICATION

Joanna Aizenberg, the July-August Harvard Portrait subject (page 59), is both McKay professor of materials science and professor of chemistry and chemical biology and Wallach professor at the Radcliffe Institute, where she is a fellow this fall. Harvard Magazine regrets omitting her Radcliffe professorship; her fellowship was announced too late to report then.

ERRATA

Professor of physics and astronomy Christopher W. Stubbs was correctly identified in “Eye on the Universe” (July-August, page 30), and then improperly awarded a new middle initial later in the same story. He knows who he is.

Harvard Divinity School advises that Elizabeth Siwo-Olakundi (photograph, July-August, page 47) earned a master of theology degree, not the M.T.S. it reported earlier.

SERIOUSLY FUNNY

(continued from page 43)

textured portrait of a tribe that can claim Crazy Horse and Black Elk, but whose current situation embodies some of the worst fallout of the settlers’ genocide of Indians. “Most everybody wants to be rich, millions want to be famous, but no one wants to be mistaken for a hero,” writes Frazier near the beginning of On the Rez: “This recent change in our psychology is baffling to me. It is also profoundly un-Indian….For many tribes, life revolved around heroism.” So he locates a heroine at the center of his story, “a girl athlete who died just before she turned eighteen. She starred for the Lady Thorpes, the girls’ basketball team at Pine Ridge High School, from 1987 through 1991. I have only heard about her and read local news stories about her, but words fail me when I try to say how much I admire her. Her name was SuAnne Big Crow.”

In addition to his prodigious field research, Frazier’s books build on voluminous reading, much of it done in the main reading room of the New York Public Library, a building he loves and spends endless hours inside. “He showed me his call slips from the New York Public Library for his Siberia book,” says an awed Singer. “The pile was as thick as a couple decks of cards.”

A signature element of a Frazier book is the way the big picture dissolves smoothly into an anecdote from the author’s own experience, and back. In the first chapter of Great Plains, for example, Frazier observes that “America is like a wave of higher and higher frequency toward each end, and lowest frequency in the middle.” This comes shortly after we have learned that at his sister’s wedding reception in Cleveland, to entertain the bridesmaids, Frazier ate “a large black cricket the size of my thumb.” A couple of pages later, he notes that “anyplace I move, I ruin. Look at the north side of Chicago. Look at SoHo. I move in, the rents go up, coffee shops become French restaurants, useful stores close. Don’t ask me how I do it—it’s just a talent I have.”

Very soon, we are driving eastward from Glacier National Park in Montana with Frazier and a West Indian friend (Jamaica Kincaid, now a visiting lecturer at Harvard) who had never seen the American West, apart from California:

The road began to descend, and at the turn of each switchback another mountain range would disappear, like scenery withdrawn into the wings, while the sky that replaced it grew larger and larger. We left the park and turned onto U.S. Highway 89. A driver coming down this road gets the most dramatic first glimpse of the Great Plains I’ve ever seen. For some miles, pine trees and foothills are all around; then, suddenly, there is nothing across the road but sky, and a sign says HILL TRUCKS GEAR DOWN, and you come over a little rise, and the horizon jumps a hundred miles away in an instant. My friend’s jaw—her whole face, really—fell, and she said, “I had no idea!”

In secondary school at the all-male Western Reserve Academy in Ohio, Frazier and his friends were “addicted to being funny.” He told his family as a young boy that he would go to Harvard. “We were like swamp Yankees,” he says. “I always aspired to Shaker Heights.”

Watching the televised Young People’s Concerts hosted by Leonard Bernstein ’39 was what pulled Frazier toward Harvard: “I thought Leonard Bernstein was the coolest guy I ever saw.”

In Cambridge, he studied little and moved from classics to English, graduating with honors in general studies, but found a home at the Harvard Lampoon, where he befriended a fellow Midwesterner, James Downey ’74, who went on to become the paterfamilias of comedy writers at Saturday Night Live. (“The Lampoon had been a preppy, raccoon-coat thing,” Frazier explains, “but then some Midwestern guys got on.”) For three years, Frazier drew cartoons for the Lampoon, then began writing material for its parodies of Cosmopolitan and Sports Illustrated. The work was fun, exciting, and highly collaborative, but “when it was time to say who did what, I didn’t like that part,” Frazier says. “I wanted to know what I had done, to be a voice myself right from the get-go. For me, writing is a solitary thing.”

He soon got his chance to practice that solitary craft professionally. Right after college, Frazier got in touch with New Yorker editor Robert Bingham ’48, who had much enjoyed a Lampoon parody of a Pauline Kael film review that Frazier
Frazier’s father’s reaction to his son’s new job was, “This is like throwing the football around with your boy in the backyard, and next thing you know, he’s playing for the Miami Dolphins.”

York City. “To go fishing, Sandy used to take an Adirondack Trailways bus up to the Catskills and hike into the woods,” says Singer. “He was too cool to have a knapsack. He probably brought a suitcase just to make it more inconvenient for himself.”

Notwithstanding such excursions, the New Yorker has remained Frazier’s home throughout his career, with the exception of one six-year period in the 1990s. Condé Nast acquired the magazine in the mid-1980s and in 1992 installed Tina Brown as editor. Though Frazier says Brown was “very well educated and knew what good writing was,” he felt “scandalized by the influence of the business side, and I thought a lot of the stuff [published] was terrible. Some of it was exciting, but most of it ill considered. I felt that even [Richard] Avedon pictures were out of place in the New Yorker—a full-page photo of Barry Goldwater in a work shirt?”

“Some other magazines were giving celebrities the right to veto cover photos, or having celebrities interview themselves,” he continues. “We were all back ing off and letting celebrities take over. Then it was announced that Roseanne Barr was going to ‘guest-edit’ a special issue of the New Yorker, on women. That was too much. I faxed in my letter of resignation. I didn’t want to be editing the New Yorker. Eventually she ‘consulted’ on that issue, and they never tried that again. For that alone, I made a contribution to journalism.” In 1998, David Remnick replaced Brown as editor, and before too long, contacted Frazier. “I looked at the magazine he was editing, and read his book Lenin’s Tomb; I was doing two humor pieces—I didn’t dislike Roseanne, I just didn’t think she should be editing the New Yorker. Eventually she ‘consulted’ on that issue, and they never tried that again. For that alone, I made a contribution to journalism.” In 1998, David Remnick replaced Brown as editor, and before too long, contacted Frazier. “I looked at the magazine he was editing, and read his book Lenin’s Tomb; I was doing two humor pieces—I didn’t dislike Roseanne, I just didn’t think she should be editing the New Yorker. Eventually she ‘consulted’ on that issue, and they never tried that again. For that alone, I made a contribution to journalism.”

In the interview, Shawn asked what Frazier was this weird little guy who started the process. “I like to revise and retype,” he says. “A lot of bad writing is because people don’t have to retype. I like retyping.”

The typewriter clicks on in Frazier’s third-floor home office in Montclair. (He has not had an office at the New Yorker for 26 years.) Though he lived for 13 years in Manhattan andsix years in Brooklyn, and knows the city well—there is even a lampoon announcing the launch of a more sophisticated, European-toned spin-off from Playboy called Oui, and asking if any young writers there might want to apply for a job. Frazier moved to Chicago to write copy for pictorials of naked women. “It was an extremely difficult job,” he recalls. “There are people who can write really excellent ‘girl copy,’ I did not have that skill and only lasted two and a half months.”

Frazier also contributed regularly to the Atlantic and Outside, which has published many of his fishing articles. His book The Fish’s Eye: Essays about Angling and the Outdoors (2002) collects 17 of Frazier’s fishing pieces, many of them drawing on stream-based research in Montana, although the lead essay, “Anglers,” explores the little-known world of fishing in New

Craig A. Lambert ’69, Ph.D. ’78, is deputy editor of this magazine.