

Memoir recalls sometimes strange, always exciting, life

Joe Feuerherd | Aug. 28, 2009



Christopher Buckley (John Huba)

Though his appearance at his high school alma mater was advertised and anticipated, novelist Christopher Buckley was absent from the two-and-a-half-day early summer conference remembering "The Catholic William F. Buckley Jr." Christopher had a conflict due to a "contractual obligation" in Denver, the gracious host explained, but many of the 125 persons gathered suspected that was a polite excuse.

"Cousin Christopher, wherever you are, I forgive you," deadpanned James F.W. Buckley, a 1973 graduate of Benedictine Portsmouth Abbey School that hosted the June 18-20 event in Rhode Island. Christopher, the only child of Patricia and William F. Buckley had entered the federal witness protection program, joked another presenter.

Losing Mum and Pup



LOSING MUM AND PUP: A MEMOIR

Christopher Buckley

By Christopher Buckley
Published by Twelve, \$24.99

Nine months prior to that gathering, Christopher Buckley's endorsement of Barack Obama's presidential bid (in an article for *The Daily Beast* titled "Sorry Dad, I'm Voting for Obama") resulted in his banishment from *National Review*, the conservative journal founded by his father in 1955. To be sure, Christopher's support for Obama was an embarrassment to those who claimed, if not a bloodline, then special privilege as heirs to the senior Buckley's political philosophy. The prince had strayed.

But given the passage of time, the Obama-endorsement apostasy would likely have been forgiven. After all,

while Christopher exuded a temperamental conservatism and possessed political credentials of his own (he had been a speechwriter for Vice President George H.W. Bush in the 1980s), he was not foremost a partisan animal. He was a novelist and satirist, whose books included *The White House Mess* and *Thank You for Smoking*, later a hit movie.

The apple, moreover, hadn't fallen far from the tree. In his prime the senior Buckley exhibited any number of iconoclastic aberrations that infuriated conservatives and brought the admiration of some liberals. Among them: support for legalizing marijuana, endorsement of leftist congressional candidate Allard Lowenstein (if Congress was to be made up of so many liberals in the mid-1970s, Buckley reasoned, they might as well be smart ones), his advocacy for turning the Panama Canal over to Panamanians, and, toward the end of his life, opposition to the Iraq war.

No, Christopher's sin was not political. It was personal, as good memoirs are. A slim volume, *Losing Mum and Pup* recounts the death of his mother Patricia in April 2007, and of his father just 11 months later. The book reveals embarrassing details of the devoted couple's eccentric and exciting life. To considerable buzz in Mum's Manhattan socialite circles and Pup's extended political family, lengthy excerpts from the memoir appeared in the April 22, 2009, *New York Times Magazine*.

In the manner of the era, though extreme even for those days, Christopher writes, his father was largely absent. Of Buckley's last months, as his health failed and the son became caregiver to the father, Christopher writes: "He was clutching my arm. It wrenched my heart. This was terra nova to me: the delusional parent who must be denied for his own good. Every fiber of one's being reflexively inclines to accede to the wishes of a parent. It is *contra naturam* to say no to someone who has raised you, clothed you, fed you from day one -- well, even if, in Pup's case, these actual duties were elaborately subcontracted."

The betrayal, angst and anger of the Buckleyites toward the prodigal orphan were publicly expressed by Joan Frawley Desmond, herself a satellite in the conservative universe Buckley molded over five decades (her father, Patrick Frawley, used his Schick Razor fortune to fund conservative and right-wing causes, including, in the mid-1960s, the nascent political career of an actor turned politician by the name of Ronald Reagan).

"The appearance of a portion of the book in *The New York Times Magazine* suggests that the scion has provided a juicy deconstruction of a conservative icon," wrote Frawley Desmond. "Readers are invited to feast on a series of delicious vignettes that strip away the parents' public charisma and reveal their profound limitations in domestic relations. Mom is a serial liar and self-justifying socialite who never apologizes for routine bad behavior. Dad is a frenetic "great man" and control freak who impatiently abandons his only son on the day of his college graduation."

Frawley Desmond concludes: "Despite the occasional laughs, this reader wishes the author had filed the manuscript away and waited for the gift of time and perspective. It would have been a better book."

Frawley Desmond is unfair in at least one respect. Christopher Buckley's portrait of his parents' declining years and flashbacks to his youth include more than "occasional laughs." The child of Bill and Pat Buckley may be an ungrateful lout, but he is a decidedly skilled humorist. *Losing Mum and Pup* is a genuine howl, both sharp-edged and amazingly tender at times, ringing familiar to anyone with the misfortune to lose both parents in close proximity due to devastating and dehumanizing illness.

Meanwhile, those gathered for the Portsmouth conference -- including William F. Buckley's brother, former New York Sen. James Buckley, assorted other Buckylys, and a variety of foot soldiers of the conservative movement over the last half century -- knew that *Losing Mum and Pup*, whatever its faults, had at least one beneficial effect. William F. Buckley was again, 15 months after his death, a hot commodity, not a small feat for a man who viewed relevance -- his relevance -- as essential to a well-lived life.

And now there's more: Along with Christopher's *Losing Mum and Pup*, there is National Review senior editor Richard Brookhiser's *Right Time, Right Place: Coming of Age with William F. Buckley Jr. and the Conservative Movement* (Basic Books); Garry Wills, whose sometimes-off, sometimes-on 50-year friendship with Buckley was on again in Buckley's final years, penned a 5,300-word remembrance in the July/August *Atlantic Monthly*; Sam Tanenhaus, editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, is working on a full-scale Buckley biography (the definitive work is currently John Judis' 1988 *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives*); and former Buckley acolyte Lee Edwards is working on a remembrance.

Buckley, it seems, is back.

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