Arts & Humanities

My Columbia

By
Eric McHenry
|
Spring 2005

The elevator ride to Ashbel Green's office, on the 21st floor of Random House's new world headquarters at 55th and Broadway, is so fast it makes your ears pop. This turns out to be good preparation for a conversation with Green, who also moves from point A to point B with startling efficiency. It's not that he's brusque, or even brisk. It's just that he has been an editor for more than 40 years and he doesn't use unnecessary words.

Seated at a desk strewn with books and bound galleys, Green '50CC, '52GSAS recalls an unpromising submission he pulled from the slush pile back in the early '70s. "It had come in with a two-page accompanying letter, which is a lot more than you should write," he says. "George sometimes tended to garrulity."

George, thankfully, was George V. Higgins, and the manuscript was *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* — a hooded-eyed hood's-eye view of the Boston criminal underworld and a paradigm of prose economy. "I don't think I asked George to change a hundred words in that book," Green says. It went on to become a best-seller, a movie starring Robert Mitchum, and a genre classic. When Elmore Leonard was asked to name the 10 best crime novels of all time, he responded, *"The Friends of Eddie Coyle."* Never judge a book by its cover letter.

Green has seen some 400 titles into print during his four decades at Alfred A. Knopf by an extraordinary roster of writers — everyone from Gabriel García Márquez to Gertrude Himmelfarb to George H.W. Bush, with whom he still exchanges Christmas cards. He has edited fiction, biography, autobiography, history, current affairs, and public policy, but until recently he had never tried his hand at an anthology. As chairman of the C250 publications committee, Green spent about two years' worth of Fridays putting together a book of reminiscences by distinguished alumni, former

administrators, and former faculty. Published in November by Columbia University Press, *My Columbia* includes excerpts from the memoirs of Margaret Mead ’23Barnard, ’29GSAS, Whittaker Chambers, Jack Kerouac, Darryl Pinckney ’75CC, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and many others, along with poems, parts of novels, letters, and miscellany. It opens with the diary of George Templeton Strong 1838CC and closes with a cartoon by Edward Koren ’57CC.

Green is characteristically pithy in his introduction, framing the 450-page book in just under 450 words. “Other books have described life at Oxford, Harvard, and Yale, but these tended to consist of commissioned articles,” he writes. “The choices that have been made for this volume are part of the authors’ lives; thus the Columbia experience comes out of the context of those lives.” This format, he admits, did force him to rein in his editorial impulses just a bit. “Some of the phrases may seem incorrect,” he writes, “but I have essentially left the texts as they were originally printed.”

When he was young, Green always suspected he’d grow up to be a journalist. And it does seem to be in his blood — he is both the father and the son of a newspaperman. But he never really burned to write. At Columbia, he contributed to the *Jester* and the *Spectator*, but had more fun managing WKCR. “I once said to Roone Arledge [’52CC] — he was editor of the yearbook — ‘How is it that you ended up in broadcasting and I ended up in print?’”

For several years after finishing his degrees, Green “did a lot of circling.” Then, in the early 1960s, while working as publicity director for Prentice-Hall, he tried a little editing and liked it. His true enthusiasm, he says, is reading. “I think the thing that I enjoy most about the job is that it’s a continuing process of self-education. Every book that you read, you learn something about.” Dissatisfied with this sentence, he revises it. “You learn something from every book you read.”

By his own count, Green read more than 100 books while choosing the 43 excerpts that make up *My Columbia*. And he was happy to do it, except inasmuch as it kept him from other books. “One of the negative aspects of this job is that I have very little time for recreational reading,” he says. “So on this trip to Rome that I just took, I managed to read four books — the only virtue of a long plane ride.”

The books, incidentally, were three potboilers and a history of Hollywood. “I deal with a lot of serious books,” he says, “so I tend to do less-serious recreational reading. It’s a cleaning out of the pipes.”

Read more from ***Eric McHenry***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Eric McHenry***