'Working' Review: 'Just Remember: Turn Every Page'

Robert Caro is a reporter first and foremost. Favorite aphorisms of his include 'truth takes time'—certainly true in his case.

By Edward Kosner
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SAVE PRINT TEXT

Embarking on his biography of Lyndon Johnson in the mid-1970s, Robert Caro went to the pharaonic LBJ library and museum in Austin, Texas. He asked where the 36th president's papers were kept and was directed to a great marble staircase.

"At its top was a glass wall four stories high," he writes in "Working." "Behind the glass, on each of the four stories, were rows of tall red boxes—175 rows across, each row six boxes high. . . . All I could see from the bottom of the stairs were those boxes, but as I climbed the stairs, there came into view behind them more boxes, long lines of them. The only light on the four floors was that at the front, and the rows of boxes stretched back into gloom and then darkness as far as I could see."

Robert Caro in an undated photograph.
PHOTO: MARIO RUIZ/THE LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

It turned out that there were 40,000 boxes containing 32 million pieces of paper. Robert Caro couldn't know it at the time, but he was essentially staring at the rest of his life.

Now 83 and not yet finished with his monumental Johnson pentalogy, Mr. Caro is secure in the modern pantheon of American historians and biographers, along with David McCullough (John Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, Truman) and Ron Chernow (Washington, Grant, Hamilton) and a few others. He has had only two subjects—the "Power Broker" Robert Moses and LBJ—but has won two Pulitzer Prizes and every other imaginable honor and has become a symbol of both heroic purpose and snaillike progress. Indeed, he has put out "Working" now because he fears that it will take him so long to complete his final Johnson volume that he won't live long enough to publish a real memoir.

"Working" is a slender patchwork of magazine pieces and interviews interspersed with some new material. It's intended to explain how and why he does what he does and, here and there, to explain himself to himself. It's straightforward and becomingly modest without humblebragging or virtue-signaling, to use two terms that Mr. Caro would abhor. It's about practicing journalism on an epic scale.

WORKING

By Robert Caro
Knopf, 207 pages, $25

For all his literary laurels, Bob Caro is a journalist. An Upper West Side New Yorker, he started out after Princeton at a small New Jersey paper, then caught on at Newsday, the serious Long Island tabloid. He credits two men for the simple admonitions that shaped his career. One was R.P. Blackmur, the celebrated literary critic, whose course in fiction writing he took at Princeton. Always facile, young Caro churned out a story every two weeks, got good grades on them and thought he had impressed Blackmur. At their final meeting, the professor praised his writing, then added: "But you're never going to achieve what you want to, Mr. Caro, if you don't stop thinking with your fingers."

The other commandment was equally direct. It came from Alan Hathway, the Newsday managing editor, a crusty old-timer. Mr. Caro, then a junior reporter, had lucked into a trove of files for a big probe, and Hathway promoted him to the paper's investigative team. "But I don't know anything about investigative reporting," Mr. Caro said. "Just remember," Hathway replied. "Turn every page. Never assume anything. Turn every goddamned page."

"Working" is full of exemplary tales showing Mr. Caro putting the Blackmur-Hathway credo into practice. He chose Robert Moses as his first subject because he felt the master builder who sculpted the New York metropolitan area with his bridges, expressways and parks was the single most powerful political figure in urban America, although he never won an election during his reign of more than 40 years. Interviewing and reinterviewing reluctant sources, hunting for files secreted from his gaze, Mr. Caro labored for years, so broke most of the time that he recruited his wife to sell his house.

But he finally got access to enough records to document that Moses had essentially taken a bribe from the financier Otto Kahn to reroute the Northern State Parkway on Long Island to skirt the private golf course on Kahn's estate. Then he tracked down the farmers whose lives were ruined when their land was taken for the redirected road. He did the same for the folk in 54 apartment houses in East Tremont who were dispossessed for Moses' Cross-Bronx Expressway. He calculated that Moses had expelled 250,000 residents from their homes to build his parkways.

It took Mr. Caro eight years to finish "The Power Broker." He turned in 1,050,000 words, then had to cut the manuscript to 700,000 before it was published in 1974. When the New Yorker bought four excerpts, his wife, Ina, exclaimed, "Now I can go to the dry cleaners again." She is a constant presence in the book—sharing the research burden, moving with him to the Bronx to save money in the early days and later to the forlorn Texas hill country, a full partner in prodigious effort.

Mr. Caro's magnum opus, of course, is his biography "The Years of Lyndon Johnson." He chose LBJ as another politician who had exercised unparalleled power to change people's lives, this time on a national scale. He actually talked to Johnson only once, but over the past four decades he has used his full reportorial arsenal—obsessive interviewing, document scouring, living among those who knew LBJ from boyhood—to reconstruct him in pointillist detail.

In "Working," he describes some of his tricks of the trade. He writes 1,000 words a day in longhand drafts, then types the book on his vintage Smith Corona Electra 210. Every page is later scribbled with changes. Then he rewrites on his galley proofs. When interviewing, he keeps himself from breaking useful silences by scribbling "SU"—for "Shut Up!"—in his notebook. He presses people over and over to tell him exactly what they saw—the color of the walls in a room, the quality of the light—and what they heard when they were with Johnson.

From a few documents in one of those red boxes in the Johnson library, he painstakingly follows a trail establishing that as a fledgling congressman LBJ became a power in 1940 by funneling campaign contributions worth $500,000 in today's money from Texas oilmen to fellow Democrats. Chasing down the story of how Johnson stole his 1948 senatorial election, Mr. Caro finds an old Mexican immigrant named Luis Salas who grinningly admits that when he counted the ballots in his tiny district he boosted LBJ's tally by hundreds of votes, then hands Mr. Caro his 94-page memoir about the episode. Later, Mr. Caro nails down that Johnson fixed student-council elections in college.

His masterstroke is the last of a series of interviews with LBJ's younger brother, Sam Houston Johnson, an alcoholic fabulist who had spun family legends to the author. Finally, when Sam Houston is ailing and sober, Mr. Caro takes him to the reconstructed Johnson boyhood home at dinner time and seats him at his old place at the table. The author sits by the wall behind him and waits . . . and the little brother begins telling the true story of Lyndon's poisonous relationship with his father, a dreamer, that formed his relentless character.

There's much more, including some Caro aphorisms, among them: "Truth takes time" and "The facts alone aren't enough." He confesses that every time he starts to write a deeply researched section of one of the books, he thinks of more questions that have to be answered and eventually are.

The next great American political biography, at least a decade from now, will be the uninflected full chronicle of Donald Trump's presidency. Alas, Robert Caro won't be writing the story that he more than any other historian has the genius to do.

—Mr. Kosner's book, "It's News to Me," is a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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BACK TO TOP