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Mary McGrory: Read All About Her

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"Mary McGrory: The First Queen of Journalism" by John Norris is an extended love letter about the great columnist whose reporting and writing lit up Washington for more than five decades.

When I read Ana Marie Cox's review in The New York Times, I knew that she — and Norris the biographer — got Mary. Quoting McGrory's line that she always felt "a little sorry for people who didn't work for newspapers," Cox continued, "If you find yourself nodding in warm agreement, then by all means, head for the bookstore immediately." The book from Viking, Cox said, "will scratch every nostalgic itch with ink-stained fingers."

I did rush to the bookstore and decided before I even finished a chapter that every Silurian I know (and McGrory) would get a kick out of this book.

McGrory, after two decades at The Washington Post, suffered a stroke in 2003 and died in 2004. A Pulitzer Prize winner with a cherished spot on Nixon's enemies list, McGrory "was a force of nature," said Norris, who got to know her late in her life. "She struck me as a great story; she came up from very modest roots, a lower middle-class family in Boston. Her dad was a postal clerk. She had no inside scoop on the newspaper business, no relations, no real reason she should have made it and she carved out an amazing career."

For those of us fortunate enough to have worked with McGrory at the place she loved — The Washington Star — before it ceased publishing on Aug. 7, 1981, the book practically brings her back to life.

To affirm my appreciation of the book's vitality, I called Philip L. Gailey, a soft-spoken son of Homer, Ga., who had come to The Star after reporting for The Atlanta Constitution and the Miami Herald. Gailey became one of McGrory's closest confidantes while continuing his distinguished career as a national political writer at The New York Times and as the editorial page editor of the St. Petersburg Times. Mary decreed in her will that Gailey would produce and edit the posthumous collection of her columns called "The Best of Mary McGrory: A Half-Century of Washington Commentary," published in 2006 by Andrews McMeel. Now retired in Florida, Gailey keeps a copy of the new Norris book on the table on his porch so he can leaf through it at will. "It is almost like being with Mary again. You can almost hear her talk."

Mary McGrory at the St. Ann's Infant and Maternity Home.

I was first alerted to the force that was Mary McGrory in the fall of 1973 when I arrived from the Anchorage Daily News to cover Fairfax County, Va. The Star was then arguably the best afternoon newspaper in the U.S., but was declining rapidly. The Washington Post was winning the war for advertisers and had been hammering away as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein produced scoops about President Nixon and Watergate.

Several families that no longer got along cordially had owned The Evening Star since 1867 and before they bought the tabloid Washington Daily News in 1972 and renamed itself The Washington Star-News. The Noyes family controlled editorial and the Kauffmans ran the business side. The first instructions I got from David Burgin, the Metro Editor who hired me, were: "Never forget the Noyes went to Yale, the Kauffmans went to Princeton and never cross Mary McGrory."

Burgin knew that behind the welcoming smile of the demure-looking Boston lace-curtain Irish Catholic maiden was a lioness, the Star's No. 1 ace. He admired her fearlessness, her skill at office politics, her myriad political

connections, her unparalleled writing and reporting, her humor, her fierce loyalty to those close to her, and her love of the underdog.

Although he never articulated it to me, Burgin also was aware that he was in charge of dispensing a primary source of labor for McGrory: young able-bodied reporters who could be conscripted during the workday to help her entertain and enlighten indigent children from the St. Ann's Infant and Maternity Home.

I no longer recall when I was volunteered to help "Mary Gloria," as she was called by the children and the nuns, but I spent nearly a decade going to swimming pools in the suburbs she would commandeer from friends and fill with underprivileged orphans. A picture from the early 1960s provided to me by John Norris shows McGrory with a group of white children at Hickory Hill, the Virginia mansion of Robert and Ethel Kennedy. By the time I arrived at a pool party at Hickory Hill in the mid-70s, the boys and girls from St. Ann's were almost all black children who were much more scarred by parental abuse. Only Mary's devotion to the children remained rock solid.

To thank those who attended to St. Ann's children, Mary tapped us as unpaid bartenders, waiters and kitchen help to serve the powerful and famous politicians, diplomats and senior journalists at fabulous parties she threw in her modest garden apartment bordering Rock Creek Park.

I was fortunate that Mary liked my reporting style as an indefatigable doorbell ringer who refused to accept "no comment" for an answer and broke stories.

As I moved up away from the school boards and sewer zoning hearings of the suburbs and into the main office just south of Capitol Hill, my desk was not far from her little glass-walled office that adjoined the newsroom. By the mid 1970s, Washington was besieged by homeless people who often slept in the winter over foul hot air grates connected to the steam heating system network that warmed government buildings, including the White House.

Trying to convince the President to do more about the homeless was one of her countless crusades. Mary resisted the installation of computers at the Star, which we were forced to share. On deadline, she would emerge in the newsroom and gently kick you off the computer, by lighting a Marlboro Red and saying, "Get Off My Grate."

Name a young reporter from those days – Maureen Dowd and Gloria Borger immediately come to mind – and you will find someone Mary helped. I was lucky in that regard too. While covering the Justice Department for the National Staff, I applied for a Ford Foundation Fellowship to the Yale Law School for reporters writing about the law. Mary was my main champion and insisted on writing a letter of recommendation in addition to the one from Murray Gart, a tough former chief of correspondents for Time Inc., who had become the paper's editor when Time bought it from Joe Allbritton.

Gart, as Phil Gailey recently reminded me, never had a chance with Mary. He stood for everything she despised about corporate journalism. So months after giving me a bottle of Lanson's Champagne when I was accepted at Yale, Gart informed me that he was reneging on the Star's commitment to the Ford Foundation that Time would pay my salary while I was at Yale. Since I was making $32,000 a year, Gart could save Time, Inc., then the nation's largest media company, close to $16,000 by cutting in half his pledge to cover my salary, a move that pushed me to the National Capitol Bank of Washington to borrow the difference. Fearful that Mary would jeopardize herself by exploding at Gart, I did not disclose the news to her immediately. But my newsroom friends soon did.

Her next step was to invite Gart to lunch at the Maison Blanche, a French restaurant near the White House that had supplanted Sans Souci as the hot spot for elite journalists and top officials. The unsuspecting Gart thought he had finally broken through with McGrory. There they were in the spotlight together, at a center table – with Ben Bradlee and Art Buchwald at the next table, Joe Alsop nearby, etc. McGrory told me she satisfyingly spent the entire lunch loudly berating and publicly humiliating Gart about his decision to cut my salary. Then as they rode back to the newspaper in Gart's chauffeured Cadillac, she demanded to get out a block before they got to the front door so that no one in the news room would see her get out of the fuming editor's car.

Several months later, McGrory threw a party to celebrate my departure. As usual, I was serving drinks and washing dishes while she cooked up several surprises. She started with a skit: Al Hunt played Phil Donahue interviewing Mark Shields pretending to be Yale President A. Bartlett Giamatti. The line of questioning was: "Did Giamatti realize that by admitting Allan Frank, Yale was going to destroy –- in a blink of the eye — the town-gown relations between the University and the City of New Haven that had taken 250 years to establish? Did he know that my mere disruptive presence would hurt the reputation of the school and the city, separately and collectively?" Then McGrory's coup de grace. She asked her old pal, Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill, to sing "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" to me.

Her graciousness was boundless. Tom Dowling, who was a Washington Star columnist and sports feature writer when I arrived, just told me this story. In 1968, he had never written a news story and was working in the public affairs section at the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity in the

"war on poverty" when he was outraged by the events at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Since he had never had a byline and as a government employee was not supposed to have one, Dowling wrote a satirical piece as Michael O'Donovan, the real name of novelist Frank O'Connor, one of his favorite writers. The story was in the voice of Mr. Dooley, the fictional Chicago bartender created by another Irish humorist, Finley Peter Dunne. So who could savor this piece and all the inside Irish jokes? Dowling says: "I wanted to get into the newspaper game, but I had no clips."

So Dowling went to the Star, asked to see Mary McGrory and was ushered into that little glass office. "She read it, chuckled and said: 'You sit right here.' Off she went and came back 10 minutes later and said: 'It'll be in the Sunday paper.'" McGrory had prevailed on the Sunday editor Ed Trible to publish the story and he followed up by offering Dowling assignments reviewing books, the very same job McGrory had at the Star decades earlier.

After the Star folded, McGrory spent more than 20 years at The Washington Post where, despite her great friendships with Kay and Donald Graham and editorial page editor Meg Greenfield, she never felt quite at home.

When I heard she died, I called Greenfield's office to find out if there was going to be a funeral or memorial service. They said they were glad I had called. The ever meticulous McGrory had mapped out the details of her low mass funeral at the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament and I was to be one of the ushers at the church. McGrory's assistant gave me my strict orders: Under no circumstance was I to allow Washington Post Editor Ben Bradlee or Bob Woodward to sit on the Washington Star side of the church. While I was certain that neither man had entertained for a nanosecond the idea of not sitting on the clearly delineated Washington Post side of the church, I felt duty bound to escort each one to his pew and relay McGrory's wishes. They both laughed and Bradlee said: "I bet she did."

Months later, I received a small package in the mail. Mary had willed me a prize, a little Lucite cube with the opening fragment of the story that brought her the 1958 Front Page First Prize Interpretive and Grand Prize Award from the Washington Newspaper Guild. For me, she had picked a New York dateline: "Oct. 29 — Of the two millionaires trampling the streets begging for work here, Gov. Averell Harriman is considered the poorer prospect." It sits proudly on my mantel.