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COLD MOUNTAIN

THE #1 BESTSELLING NOVEL BY

CHARLES FRAZIER

C O L D M O U N T A I N

A NOVEL

BY

CHARLES FRAZIER

VINTAGE CONTEMPORARIES

Vintage Books

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

SECOND VINTAGE OPEN-MARKET EDITION, DECEMBER 2003

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Frazier, Charles.

Cold mountain / Charles Frazier.—Vintage Books ed.

p. cm.

1. United States—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Fiction. I. Title.
[PS3556.R3599C6 1998]
813'.54—dc21 98-11053
CIP

Vintage Open-Market Edition ISBN: 1-4000-7705-2

www.vintagebooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

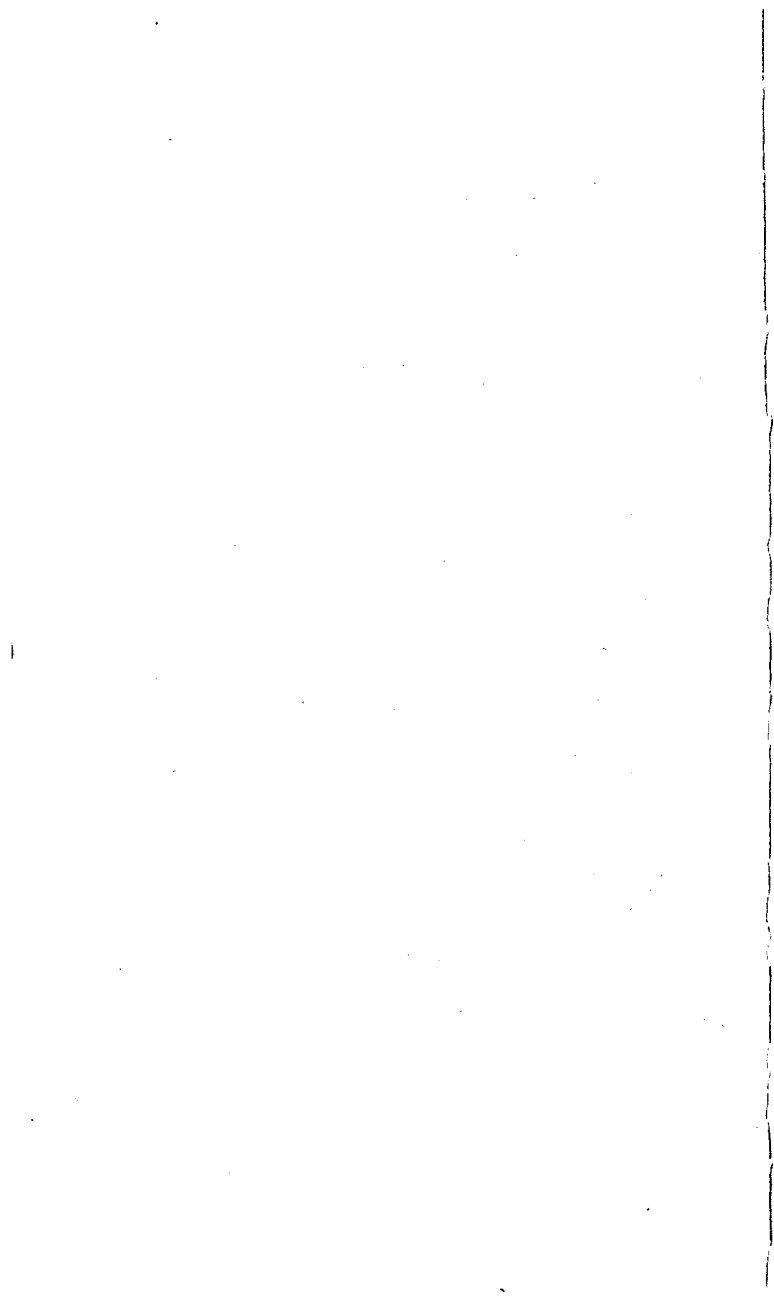
It is difficult to believe in the dreadful but quiet war of organic beings, going on in the peaceful woods, & smiling fields.

—*Darwin, 1839 journal entry*

Men ask the way to Cold Mountain.
Cold Mountain: there's no through trail.

—*Han-shan*

C O L D M O U N T A I N



the shadow of a crow

At the first gesture of morning, flies began stirring. Inman's eyes and the long wound at his neck drew them, and the sound of their wings and the touch of their feet were soon more potent than a yardful of roosters in rousing a man to wake. So he came to yet one more day in the hospital ward. He flapped the flies away with his hands and looked across the foot of his bed to an open triple-hung window. Ordinarily he could see to the red road and the oak tree and the low brick wall. And beyond them to a sweep of fields and flat piney woods that stretched to the western horizon. The view was a long one for the flatlands, the hospital having been built on the only swell within eyeshot. But it was too early yet for a vista. The window might as well have been painted grey.

Had it not been too dim, Inman would have read to pass the time until breakfast, for the book he was reading had the effect of settling his mind. But he had burned up the last of his own candles reading to bring sleep the night before,

and lamp oil was too scarce to be striking the hospital's lights for mere diversion. So he rose and dressed and sat in a ladderback chair, putting the gloomy room of beds and their broken occupants behind him. He flapped again at the flies and looked out the window at the first smear of foggy dawn and waited for the world to begin shaping up outside.

The window was tall as a door, and he had imagined many times that it would open onto some other place and let him walk through and be there. During his first weeks in the hospital, he had been hardly able to move his head, and all that kept his mind occupied had been watching out the window and picturing the old green places he recollected from home. Childhood places. The damp creek bank where Indian pipes grew. The corner of a meadow favored by brown-and-black caterpillars in the fall. A hickory limb that overhung the lane, and from which he often watched his father driving cows down to the barn at dusk. They would pass underneath him, and then he would close his eyes and listen as the cupping sound of their hooves in the dirt grew fainter and fainter until it vanished into the calls of katydids and peepers. The window apparently wanted only to take his thoughts back. Which was fine with him, for he had seen the metal face of the age and had been so stunned by it that when he thought into the future, all he could vision was a world from which everything he counted important had been banished or had willingly fled.

By now he had stared at the window all through a late summer so hot and wet that the air both day and night felt like breathing through a dishrag, so damp it caused fresh sheets to sour under him and tiny black mushrooms to grow overnight from the limp pages of the book on his bedside table. Inman suspected that after such long examination, the grey window had finally said about all it had to say. That morning, though, it surprised him, for it brought to mind a

lost memory of sitting in school, a similar tall window beside him framing a scene of pastures and low green ridges terracing up to the vast hump of Cold Mountain. It was September. The hayfield beyond the beaten dirt of the school playground stood pant-waist high, and the heads of grasses were turning yellow from need of cutting. The teacher was a round little man, hairless and pink of face. He owned but one rusty black suit of clothes and a pair of old overlarge dress boots that curled up at the toes and were so worn down that the heels were wedgelike. He stood at the front of the room rocking on the points. He talked at length through the morning about history, teaching the older students of grand wars fought in ancient England.

After a time of actively not listening, the young Inman had taken his hat from under the desk and held it by its brim. He flipped his wrist, and the hat skimmed out the window and caught an updraft and soared. It landed far out across the playground at the edge of the hayfield and rested there black as the shadow of a crow squatted on the ground. The teacher saw what Inman had done and told him to go get it and to come back and take his whipping. The man had a big paddleboard with holes augered in it, and he liked to use it. Inman never did know what seized him at that moment, but he stepped out the door and set the hat on his head at a dapper rake and walked away, never to return.

The memory passed on as the light from the window rose toward day. The man in the bed next to Inman's sat and drew his crutches to him. As he did every morning, the man went to the window and spit repeatedly and with great effort until his clogged lungs were clear. He ran a comb through his black hair, which hung lank below his jaw and was cut square around. He tucked the long front pieces of hair behind his ears and put on his spectacles of smoked glass, which he wore even in the dim of morning, his eyes

apparently too weak for the wannest form of light. Then, still in his nightshirt, he went to his table and began working at a pile of papers. He seldom spoke more than a word or two at a time, and Inman had learned little more of him than that his name was Balis and that before the war he had been to school at Chapel Hill, where he had attempted to master Greek. All his waking time was now spent trying to render ancient scribble from a fat little book into plain writing anyone could read. He sat hunched at his table with his face inches from his work and squirmed in his chair, looking to find a comfortable position for his leg. His right foot had been taken off by grape at Cold Harbor, and the stub seemed not to want to heal and had rotted inch by inch from the ankle up. His amputations had now proceeded past the knee, and he smelled all the time like last year's ham.

For a while there was only the sound of Balis's pen scratching, pages turning. Then others in the room began to stir and cough, a few to moan. Eventually the light swelled so that all the lines of the varnished beadboard walls stood clear, and Inman could cock back on the chair's hind legs and count the flies on the ceiling. He made it to be sixty-three.

As Inman's view through the window solidified, the dark trunks of the oak trees showed themselves first, then the patchy lawn, and finally the red road. He was waiting for the blind man to come. He had attended to the man's movements for some weeks, and now that he had healed enough to be numbered among the walking, Inman was determined to go out to the cart and speak to the man, for Inman figured him to have been living with a wound for a long time.

Inman had taken his own during the fighting outside Petersburg. When his two nearest companions pulled away his clothes and looked at his neck, they had said him a solemn farewell in expectation of his death. We'll meet

again in a better world, they said. But he lived as far as the field hospital, and there the doctors had taken a similar attitude. He was classed among the dying and put aside on a cot to do so. But he failed at it. After two days, space being short, they sent him on to a regular hospital in his own state. All through the mess of the field hospital and the long grim train ride south in a boxcar filled with wounded, he had agreed with his friends and the doctors. He thought he would die. About all he could remember of the trip was the heat and the odors of blood and of shit, for many of the wounded had the flux. Those with the strength to do so had knocked holes in the sides of the wood boxcars with the butts of rifles and rode with their heads thrust out like crated poultry to catch the breeze.

At the hospital, the doctors looked at him and said there was not much they could do. He might live or he might not. They gave him but a grey rag and a little basin to clean his own wound. Those first few days, when he broke consciousness enough to do it, he wiped at his neck with the rag until the water in the basin was the color of the comb on a turkey-cock. But mainly the wound had wanted to clean itself. Before it started scabbing, it spit out a number of things: a collar button and a piece of wool collar from the shirt he had been wearing when he was hit, a shard of soft grey metal as big as a quarter dollar piece, and, unaccountably, something that closely resembled a peach pit. That last he set on the nightstand and studied for some days. He could never settle his mind on whether it was a part of him or not. He finally threw it out the window but then had troubling dreams that it had taken root and grown, like Jack's bean, into something monstrous.

His neck had eventually decided to heal. But during the weeks when he could neither turn his head nor hold up a book to read, Inman had lain every day watching the blind

man. The man would arrive alone shortly after dawn, pushing his cart up the road, doing it about as well as any man who could see. He would set up his business under an oak tree across the road, lighting a fire in a ring of stones and boiling peanuts over it in an iron pot. He would sit all day on a stool with his back to the brick wall, selling peanuts and newspapers to those at the hospital whole enough to walk. Unless someone came to buy something, he rested as still as a stuffed man with his hands together in his lap.

That summer, Inman had viewed the world as if it were a picture framed by the molding around the window. Long stretches of time often passed when, for all the change in the scene, it might as well have been an old painting of a road, a wall, a tree, a cart, a blind man. Inman had sometimes counted off slow numbers in his head to see how long it would be before anything of significance altered. It was a game and he had rules for it. A bird flying by did not count. Someone walking down the road did. Major weather changes did—the sun coming out, fresh rain—but shadows of passing clouds did not. Some days he'd get up in the thousands before there was any allowable alteration in the elements of the picture. He believed the scene would never leave his mind—wall, blind man, tree, cart, road—no matter how far on he lived. He imagined himself an old man thinking about it. Those pieces together seemed to offer some meaning, though he did not know what and suspected he never would.

Inman watched the window as he ate his breakfast of boiled oats and butter, and shortly he saw the blind man come trudging up the road, his back humped against the weight of the cart he pushed, little twin clouds of dust rising from beneath the turning cartwheels. When the blind man had his fire going and his peanuts boiling, Inman put his plate on the windowsill and went outside and with the shuffling step of an old man crossed the lawn to the road.

The blind man was square and solid in shoulder and hip, and his britches were cinched at the waist with a great leather belt, wide as a razor strop. He went hatless, even in the heat, and his cropped hair was thick and grey, coarse-textured as the bristles to a hemp brush. He sat with his head tipped down and appeared to be somewhat in a muse, but he raised up as Inman approached, like he was really looking. His eyelids, though, were dead as shoe leather and were sunken into puckered cups where his eyeballs had been.

Without pausing even for salutation Inman said, Who put out your pair of eyes?

The blind man had a friendly smile on his face and he said, Nobody. I never had any.

That took Inman aback, for his imagination had worked in the belief that they had been plucked out in some desperate and bloody dispute, some brute fraction. Every vile deed he had witnessed lately had been at the hand of a human agent, so he had about forgot that there was a whole other order of misfortune.

—Why did you never have any? Inman said.

—Just happened that way.

—Well, Inman said. You're mighty calm. Especially for a man that most would say has taken the little end of the horn all his life.

The blind man said, It might have been worse had I ever been given a glimpse of the world and then lost it.

—Maybe, Inman said. Though what would you pay right now to have your eyeballs back for ten minutes? Plenty, I bet.

The man studied on the question. He worked his tongue around the corner of his mouth. He said, I'd not give an Indian-head cent. I fear it might turn me hateful.

—It's done it to me, Inman said. There's plenty I wish I'd never seen.

—That's not the way I meant it. You said ten minutes. It's having a thing and the loss I'm talking about.

The blind man twisted a square of newsprint up into a cone and then dipped with a riddly spoon into the pot and filled the cone with wet peanuts. He handed it to Inman and said, Come on, cite me one instance where you wished you were blind.

Where to begin? Inman wondered. Malvern Hill. Sharpsburg. Petersburg. Any would do admirably as example of unwelcome visions. But Fredericksburg was a day particularly lodged in his mind. So he sat with his back to the oak and halved the wet peanut shells and thumbed the meats out into his mouth and told the blind man his tale, beginning with how the fog had lifted that morning to reveal a vast army marching uphill toward a stone wall, a sunken road. Inman's regiment was called to join the men already behind the wall, and they had quickly formed up alongside the big white house at the top of Maryes Heights. Lee and Longstreet and befeathered Stuart stood right there on the lawn before the porch, taking turns glassing the far side of the river and talking. Longstreet had a grey shawl of wool draped about his shoulders. Compared to the other two men, Longstreet looked like a stout hog drover. But from what Inman had seen of Lee's way of thinking, he'd any day rather have Longstreet backing him in a fight. Dull as Longstreet looked, he had a mind that constantly sought ground configured so a man could hunker down and do a world of killing from a position of relative safety. And that day at Fredericksburg was all in the form of fighting that Lee mistrusted and that Longstreet welcomed.

After Inman's regiment had formed up, they dropped over the brow of the hill and into the withering fire of the Federals. They stopped once to touch off a volley, and then they ran down to the sunken road behind the stone wall.

On the way a ball brushed the skin of Inman's wrist and felt like the tongue of a cat licking, doing no damage, only making a little abraded stripe.

When they got to the road, Inman could see they were in a fine spot. Those already there had trenched along the tightly built wall so that you could stand up comfortably and still be in its shelter. The Federals had to come uphill at the wall across acres and acres of open ground. So delightful was the spot that one man jumped onto the wall and hollered out, You are all committing a mistake. You hear? A dire mistake! Balls whistled all about the man, and he jumped back down into the ditch behind the wall and danced a jig.

It was a cold day and the mud of the road was near frozen to the condition of slurry. Some of the men were barefoot. Many wore homemade uniforms in the mute colors that plant dyes make. The Federals were arrayed on the field before them, all newly outfitted. Bright and shiny in factory-made uniforms, new boots. When the Federals charged, the men behind the wall held their fire and taunted them and one called out, Come on closer, I want them boots. And they let the Federals come as near as twenty paces before shooting them down. The men behind the wall were firing at such close range that one man remarked on what a shame it was that they had paper cartridges, for if they had the separate makings—powder, ball, and wadding—they could tamp in thrifty little loads and thus save on powder.

When he was squatted down loading, Inman could hear the firing, but also the slap of balls into meat. A man near Inman grew so excited, or perhaps so weary, that he forgot to pull the ramrod from the barrel. He fired it off and it struck a Federal in the chest. The man fell backward, and the rod stood from his body and quavered about with the

last of his breathing as if he had been pierced by an unfledged arrow.

The Federals kept on marching by the thousands at the wall all through the day, climbing the hill to be shot down. There were three or four brick houses scattered out through the field, and after a time the Federals crowded up behind them in such numbers that they looked like the long blue shadows of houses at sunrise. Periodically they were driven from behind the houses by their own cavalry, who beat at them with the flats of their sabers like school-teachers paddling truants. Then they ran toward the wall leaning forward with their shoulders hunched, a posture that reminded many witnesses that day of men seeking headway against a hard-blowing rain. The Federals kept on coming long past the point where all the pleasure of whipping them vanished. Inman just got to hating them for their clodpated determination to die.

The fighting was in the way of a dream, one where your foes are ranked against you countless and mighty. And you so weak. And yet they fall and keep falling until they are crushed. Inman had fired until his right arm was weary from working the ramrod, his jaws sore from biting the ends off the paper cartridges. His rifle became so hot that the powder would sometimes flash before he could ram home the ball. At the end of the day the faces of the men around him were caked with blown-back powder so that they were various shades of blue, and they put Inman in mind of a great ape with a bulbous colorful ass he had seen in a traveling show once.

They had fought throughout the day under the eyes of Lee and Longstreet. The men behind the wall had only to crank their necks around and there the big men were, right above them looking on. The two generals spent the afternoon up on the hill coining fine phrases like a pair of wags.

Longstreet said his men in the sunken road were in such a position that if you marched every man in the Army of the Potomac across that field, his men would kill them before they got to the wall. And he said the Federals fell that long afternoon as steady as rain dripping down from the eaves of a house.

Old Lee, not to be outdone, said it's a good thing war is so terrible or else we'd get to liking it too much. As with everything Marse Robert said, the men repeated that flight of wit over and over, passing it along from man to man, as if God amighty Himself had spoken. When the report reached Inman's end of the wall he just shook his head. Even back then, early in the war, his opinion differed considerably from Lee's, for it appeared to him that we like fighting plenty, and the more terrible it is the better. And he suspected that Lee liked it most of all and would, if given his preference, general them right through the gates of death itself. What troubled Inman most, though, was that Lee made it clear he looked on war as an instrument for clarifying God's obscure will. Lee seemed to think battle—among all acts man might commit—stood outranked in sacredness only by prayer and Bible reading. Inman worried that following such logic would soon lead one to declare the victor of every brawl and dogfight as God's certified champion. Those thoughts were unspeakable among the ranks, as were his feelings that he did not enlist to take on a Marse, even one as solemn and noble-looking as Lee was that day on Maryes Heights.

Late in the afternoon the Federals quit coming and the shooting tapered off. Thousands of men lay dead and dying on the sloping field below the wall, and by dark the ones who could move had heaped up corpses to make shelter. All that night the aurora flamed and shimmered lurid colors across the sky to the north. Such a rare event was seen as an omen by the men up and down the line, and they