

Capturing Lives and Emotion in Plain Language

I'll Be Home: The Writings of Jim McGrath

edited by Darryl McGrath and Howard Healy. Albany: State University of New York Press, Excelsior Editions, 2019. Paperback, 202 pp. Index, USD\$24.95.

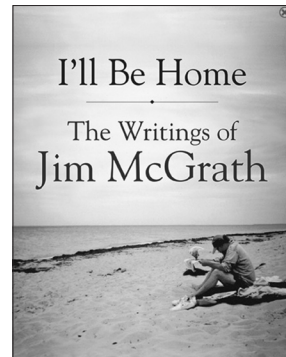
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For some seventeen years until his sudden death from a heart attack in 2013, Jim McGrath wrote nearly daily editorials in the Albany, New York, *Times Union*, my hometown newspaper. Going through this posthumous collection of editorials, opinion columns, fellowship applications, reviews, and essays on an array of topics, international to hyper-local, compiled by two people who loved him, is not at all the same reading experience. The immediacy and relevance that give editorials impact are, of course, missing or diluted in editor's notes.

What remains, however, is the sense of place, a sense of the dignity in the routine, the passion, and compassion, and the storytelling craft of an excellent old-school journalist who knows that words have power and so selects them with care. McGrath was a journalist of the sort that sadly we now see losing jobs and passing into history. This makes his book a potentially valuable model for students of literary journalism.

Newspaper editors tell new investigative reporters to "rake the leaves in a pile," that is, to pull together multiple small daily stories already published on your topic and then dig into them to pull out the bigger trend or hidden truth. McGrath's widow along with his old newspaper editor have skillfully done such raking. Seen in its entirety instead of in bits, McGrath's body of work reveals thematic threads, consistent styling, and a fixed set of principles that his faithful daily readers likely would not have focused on or even discerned. That makes his book an instructive text for beginners trying to figure out the tricks of persuasive editorial writing. How McGrath did it comes clear here.

He displayed considerable expertise when it came to the topics he wrote most about—politics in New York, especially in its capital city, Albany; gun control; crime; and mistreatment of the less fortunate. But he did not write like an expert; instead, he eschewed jargon, big words, too many long sentences. He knew his readers, like the neighbors or drinking buddies they were, so he used language and topics that made them feel at ease. His tone is homey and conversational too: "If you were, say, too busy in traffic court or in line dutifully paying your parking fines to read about this, here's a quick recap," he began a background section of an editorial on a ghost ticket



system that allowed favored Albanians to park illegally. “OK, so no jigs just yet. The spirit of the cease-fire and the ongoing peace talks will do for now,” he wrote at the end of a happy editorial in late 1997 when British and Irish leaders met to talk about getting past the Troubles in his ancestral homeland (57).

Without writing extended memoir, McGrath drew from his own life, reared in a middle-class Irish family in Boston, his sensibilities honed in public schools and the Catholic church, as he opined on bad luck, injustice, the bond of community, alcoholism, the tensions of family, loss, and emptiness. That’s misleading—he doesn’t write about issues so much as tells stories about people who have been buffeted by them. He makes you feel their pain, which you can see was more than a little his too.

In a 2001 piece, “A Lesson Taught Too Late,” he wrote about “the ruined life of Phil Caiozzo,” who died after convulsing in the Albany County Jail. “This is what society wanted from Caiozzo, and still wants from the dozens of other alcoholics on the streets of Albany. To stop drinking, and to behave. It’s not easy, not remotely easy. Not for those whose lives have hit the bottom, and not for the fortunate majority living in their midst, getting hit up for spare change and trying to step over them” (88–89).

In “‘No Room for Mercy,’” in 2003, McGrath asked, “Why was Christine Wilhelm, so horribly and so indisputably mentally ill, ever on trial for the horrific drowning of one of her young sons and the attempted drowning of the other?” then wondered what would happen to a paranoid schizophrenic in prison, and if unthinkable crime justified cruel punishment (92).

McGrath also wrote memorably about the Unabomber, a domestic terrorist finally captured in the late 1990s after years of mailing out death threats when his brother, who lived within the *Times Union’s* subscribership, recognized the writing in a demented manifesto the killer sent to media. McGrath argued strenuously against the death penalty in the case. He kept coming back to mercy (85–86).

McGrath was never a star. His career never went beyond a mid-sized daily in a small city in a profession quickly dying out. Some of the best selections in this book are essays written for fellowships he did not end up getting. His life ended suddenly in 2013, at age fifty-six, when he suffered a heart attack while driving after the ambulance taking his asthmatic wife to the hospital. The irony of that left her heart broken. Indeed, sadness permeates this whole work, epitomized by a 1994 piece, “A Road to New Hampshire,” about spending Christmas with siblings, like him, newly orphaned. “We talked a bit, looked at the passing countryside, and listened to some tapes on a tinny-sounding care stereo. Mostly though, we just drove.” This, he wrote, “was a good Christmas too: quiet, peaceful, and delightfully uneventful” (142).

Disappointment turned into a tool in the editorialist’s hands. It led him to tell of the wonder of small things like tulips blooming in downtown Albany’s Washington Park at the end of an upstate New York winter or “good coffee, and something stronger, too, to be had on just about every block” of downtown Albany’s Lark Street (6), about watching the hipsters and barflies and workaday pedestrians on Madison Avenue. It propelled McGrath to stand up for and speak up for what he thought was right, to demand and seek and advocate for solutions. He made his readers empathize—and thus persuaded them.