



THE MARATHON

Robert Caro spent decades living LBJ's life. His goal with the last volume is the same as it

PHOTOGRAPH BY ETHAN HILL FOR NEWSWEEK

By JONATHAN DARMAN

WHAT MADE JOHNSON RUN? THAT WAS THE QUESTION that, for several months in the late 1970s, drove Robert Caro mad. Never mind that Caro was better equipped to answer it than perhaps any other man, living or dead. For years, he had been at work on a nonfiction chronicle of Lyndon Johnson's early life. He had spent thousands of hours wooing and winning and interviewing Johnson's family members and neighbors. He'd even spent a long night, alone, huddled in a sleeping bag in the remote Texas hill country so he could understand exactly what the loneliness of Johnson's rural boyhood felt like. The book, along with two subsequent biographies of Johnson, would do more than any other work to shape our notion of why Johnson ran—for Congress from north Texas, for the presidency of the United States and for a place in history.

But none of that was what was driving Caro crazy. As he researched Johnson's early career in Washington, he was vexed by a more basic question: what *literally* made Johnson run? He'd learned from two sources that, as a young congressional assistant living in Washington in the early 1930s, Johnson could be seen making his way to work each day at the crack of dawn, running up Capitol Hill. Why, Caro wondered, would he run? If the sun was rising, he wouldn't have been late to work, and, even if he were, Johnson's do-nothing, bon vivant congressman boss wouldn't have much noticed. Caro paced the route, searching for answers, finding none. "I must have gone 20 times, I'm not exaggerating," he says. Then it occurred to him: he'd never walked the walk at the break of dawn. And so, early one morning, he made the trek one last time. What he saw was a revelation. In the rising sun, the Capitol looked like its ideal Greek form, "gleaming, brilliant, almost dazzlingly white." After weeks of wondering, Caro finally understood: "There it was, everything Johnson ever wanted in life; of course he would run."

By training, Robert Caro is a journalist. By profession, he is a biographer, among the most highly acclaimed living, thanks to his four books—three volumes on Johnson and a saga about the New York public-works titan Robert Moses. But in his daily life, Caro more resembles a scientist, driven by the principle that you understand something only by observing it, watching it with great concentration and for a long time. In his New York City office, where everything has its particular place, he works long hours, seven days a week, poring through interview transcripts and primary source

notes, working slowly and deliberately on books he publishes, on average, once every 10 years. His meticulous routine is sometimes painful, he says, but necessary. Only by gathering as many facts as possible, cataloging them, cross-checking them and sitting with them at great length, can he choose the right words to re-create the past inside his readers' heads. Words matter to Caro. "I have always thought," he told me this winter, "that in nonfiction, the level of the writing has to be as good as any novel if it is going to endure."

It is an odd season in which to talk about writing that endures. Ann Coulter's

Does Caro's obsessive work life offer hope for the printed word? Or is Caro the last of his kind?

CODE OF CONDUCT: *'I trained myself to be organized,' Caro says, almost apologetically*

latest screed against the Liberal Menace, "Guilty!" sits near the top of The New York Times bestseller list. In bookstores, it competes for table space with Denis Leary's "Why We Suck." In Caro's native New York, most every media company has announced major cutbacks; gloomy young writers speak sadly of the death of print.

Can they find any comfort in Caro, whose work has lasted, at least so far? At 73, he has won the Pulitzer Prize twice. "The Power Broker," his biography of Moses, is considered the seminal text on urban power written in the 20th century. His fourth and final volume on Johnson—his current project, not to be completed, he says, for three, maybe four years—will tell the story of Johnson's White House. So highly esteemed is Caro's prior work on Johnson, the new book could determine for



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was with the first: to endure.

posterity how a man of the greatest political gifts (the Civil Rights Act of 1964) could make the greatest of presidential mistakes (the Vietnam War). The story of Robert Caro is the story of a man who set out at a young age to produce writing that would survive. A close look at his research and writing process offers lessons at a moment when it seems that nothing endures. Does Caro's obsessive work life—ruled by diligence, deliberateness and desperation—offer hope for the printed word? Or is Caro the last of his kind?

ROBERT CARO HAS ALWAYS needed more words. Growing up on New York's Upper West Side in the 1930s and '40s, reading was his haven; as a student at the Manhattan prep school Horace Mann, he devoured all six volumes of Edward Gibbon's "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." At Princeton in the '50s, he wrote his senior thesis on Ernest Hemingway, who believed ideas were best expressed in as few words as possible. (Caro's essay ran 235 pages.) Working as a cub reporter for the Long Island tabloid *Newsday*, he learned that, while editors would technically limit the number of *words* he could write, when it came time to measure his stories, they would count only *lines* on the page. So Caro peppered his typed prose with tiny carets, squeezing every inch of available white space.

By the late '60s Caro was one of *Newsday's* young stars—a man in a hurry, impressed with his own ability to annoy New York big shots. He was particularly proud when he published a front-page story on a knuckle-brained plan to build a gigantic bridge from Connecticut, across Long Island Sound, to New York's Oyster Bay.

He was surprised to learn from a source in Albany, however, that despite his exposé, the plan for the bridge was on track. "How could this be?" he thought. The answer was simple: Robert Moses, the chairman of multiple New York public authorities, had willed it to be so. And for close to 50 years, Moses, who had broad sway over parks, transport and large-scale building in New York, had gotten most everything he wanted in the state of New York. "It occurred to me then," Caro remembers, "that I thought I understood how political power worked in New York. Well, I didn't understand political power at all ... I realized that if I could tell how this man got this power, and how he used it... I could explain how democracy works in America's cities and how sometimes democracy doesn't work."

Robert Moses became Caro's obsession. For eight years, he would devote his own life to capturing Moses's in print. The harrowing details of those years are legendary in New York literary circles: how Caro pestered the high and mighty Moses (a man who had bought off or scared off plenty of other would-be biographers) for two years, until, finally, the great man relented and granted Caro a series of interviews; how Caro spent day after day with public-authority engineers, learning what kind of cement was poured for city highways, which buildings had been displaced to build the city's great expressways and what was buried under the new New York.

This obsessing came at a cost, not just

An objective observer, looking in on this world, might have wondered if Caro had lost his mind. Working on "The Power Broker" had taken him far from the limelight in a moment when New York was swooning over other men of his generation who were doing exactly what Caro wanted to do—writing nonfiction with the flare of great fiction. Lynn Nesbit, the New York literary agent, remembers Caro coming into her office in the early '70s, hoping she might help him find a new publisher. "He wasn't Tom Wolfe, he wasn't Gay [Talese]," she says. "He wasn't a star. He just had this clear passion for this book."

And he would not let the book go. With Nesbit's help, he found his way to a new publisher—and a new editor, Robert Gott-



OBJECT OF THEIR OBSESSION: *As a rule, the Caros don't discuss LBJ when they're at home*

to Caro but to his family as well. With only a \$2,600 advance from a publisher who didn't seem to care much about the project, and having left *Newsday*, Caro and his wife, Ina, cut back on expenses. Ina dropped out of a Ph.D. program in medieval history to be her husband's researcher; she worked as a schoolteacher to bring in extra income. They left Manhattan for the Bronx.

Ina was prepared to make large sacrifices for her husband. "I have feminist friends who say I shouldn't work for my husband," she says. "I'm someone who was always happiest searching around in libraries. This was the job I always wanted." The Caros' work was their shared obsession. "The '60s sort of passed us by," Ina says. "We weren't marching. We had our own world."

lieb (who still edits Caro for Knopf). Gottlieb read Caro's half-completed manuscript, which ran some 500,000 words, and had two reactions: the book was fantastic, and it needed lots of work. Caro wondered if it ought to be published in two volumes. "Maybe I can get people interested in Robert Moses once," he recalls Gottlieb telling him. "There's no way I can do it twice."

Gottlieb's instincts were right. Published (as one volume) in 1974, "The Power Broker" was a critical—and, eventually, a commercial—success. Assured by Gottlieb and Nesbit that Bob could spend the rest of his days as a writer—and still pay the bills—the Caros returned, triumphant, to Manhattan. Here the New York legend picks up again: how the Caros turned their attention to Johnson, a president who had an unparalleled understanding of political power, and thus, in Caro's eyes, was the perfect vehicle

for “explaining how national power works”; how what was supposed to be a quick book on Johnson’s presidency turned into a four-volume, 30-year endeavor tracing the president’s rise and reign; how Caro became convinced that he couldn’t understand Johnson’s world unless he lived in it, and so the Caros, middle-aged Jews from New York, moved to Texas, where they won the respect of Johnson’s kinfolk with patience and, crucially, Ina’s fig pies.

But the legend leaves one question unanswered: why has it taken Caro 30 years to write on Johnson’s presidency, the one topic so inherently interesting it would *guarantee* an enduring volume? Caro can account for each year on his long road. He thought he could dispense with an account

Caro will not discuss aspects of Johnson’s career he hasn’t yet published, not even with his closest friends.

of Johnson’s youth quickly, only to discover that the tale of how Johnson used New Deal programs to bring electricity to rural Texas was “an unbelievable story” no one had told. More important, Caro says, it was as good an explication “as I could find of how the power of the federal government could affect people’s lives.”

With that book, “The Path to Power,” finished, Caro thought he could quickly dispense with Johnson’s early political career and write the book he was really eager to write, on Johnson’s presidency. But as he got into the material, he discovered another untold story, the tale of the “stolen election” that brought Johnson to the Senate. The story of this race, captured in Caro’s controversial book “Means of Ascent,” was, in his eyes, another sterling example of American democracy in action, and how American democracy can be subverted.

Could it be that the shape of Caro’s career is not quite as accidental as he says? If he’d been so anxious to write the book on Johnson’s presidency, couldn’t he have just left the other stories for someone else to tell? Could it be that writing a book that reconciles the triumphs and the tragedies of the Texan’s White House years is too vexing? Are they simply irreconcilable?

Presented with this hypothesis, Caro looks somewhat stunned: “It couldn’t be further from the truth. The book I’m now writing is the book I’ve been wanting to write on Johnson all along.”

“This building used to be filled with writers,” Caro says as he lets a visitor into his Manhattan office, two blocks south of

Central Park. “They’re all gone now. Now it’s just me.”

Caro receives his own guests here. He has no secretary or bright young assistant to fetch coffee or comb through files. The only person he really trusts with his work is Ina; she keeps her own office further uptown. He does not use a computer. He does have a telephone, but its chief virtue, Caro says, is that it “can be turned off.” There are seldom knocks on the door. Still, Caro wears a coat and tie to the office each morning so he never forgets when he sits down with his research that he is going *to work*.

Every inch of the New York office is governed by rules. There are regulations for book placement (general nonfiction on the post-Cold War is farthest from Caro’s

desk; books on his immediate subject are kept closest) and the stacking of notebooks (new interview subjects, like the JFK speechwriter Theodore Sorensen, sit at the top of the heap, while the oldest interviews, like Johnson’s brother, Sam Houston, inhabit the bottom). The western wall contains only a giant outline—20 pages that get Caro from the beginning to the end of each book. “I trained myself to be organized,” he explains, pointing almost apologetically at his massive writer’s map. “If you’re fumbling around trying to remember what notebook has what quote, you can’t be in the room with the people you’re writing about.”

EVEN CARO’S HOME IS GOVERNED by a code he created to keep himself productive and sane. The Caros’ Upper West Side apartment is filled with books, his collection and hers, but none sit in the dining or living rooms. “When he’s at home, he doesn’t want to think about his work,” Ina explains. Indeed, though they have each devoted their lives to him for more than three decades, the Caros have a policy of not discussing Lyndon Johnson, at dinner or anywhere else. Ina presents her research to Bob in typed reports, which her husband then marks up. “I know what he’s looking for without him telling me,” she explains. She rarely reads his work until it is in manuscript form.

That’s another Caro rule: no one knows what Caro is writing until the writing is done. He will not discuss aspects of John-

son’s career that he hasn’t yet published, not even with close friends. On his desk sits a pile of typed pages, the first section of his book on Johnson’s presidency, the story of how Johnson worked as second fiddle in the White House of John F. Kennedy. It is a story we could use right now, as another dashing young president starts his presidency with his greatest political rival as his public face to the world. But Caro won’t say much about it. He will show only the last sentence of the section, the words uttered by Johnson before Air Force One took off from Dallas on the day of Kennedy’s assassination—“Now let’s get airborne.”

There may be a part of Caro that is never ready for people to read his work. At Knopf he is known for rewriting entire sections of his manuscript, not just in galleys but in actual proofed pages. He reads his published volumes with pain. He notes, with admiration, that the 19th-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert was known to revise and mark up manuscripts even after they’d been published. “There’s something to that,” Caro says, “writing and continuing to find a way to say it better.”

Caro doesn’t expect a museum, but he does keep track of his legacy. He notes, with pleasure, how often he sees college students on the subway with their heads buried in “The Power Broker.” And, more than his rules and his obsessions, his years of work and his millions of words, it is this pleasure that speaks to why Caro’s writing will last. Writing endures when it is created with a faith that, even when we can point and click and have everything shown to us, there will always be supple minds willing to do the hard work of looking at words and imagining another world.

As for Caro, he still takes every opportunity to revise and edit himself. Why, a reporter asks him, is it important that your writing endures? “You’ve asked about this several times,” he says. “I worry that I haven’t expressed myself clearly enough ... I think this might say it better.” Turning to his typewriter, Caro pulls out a sheet of paper with three short paragraphs. They are elegant answers he has prepared in advance: “I am trying to make clear through my writing something which I believe: that biography—history in general—can be literature in the deepest and highest sense of that term. Whether I am succeeding at that I don’t know—and I suppose nobody will know for many years, because the test of whether something is literature is whether it endures for a long time.” The next and last sentence is unfinished: “Sometimes I hope.” ■