

Robert Caro, The LBJ Library, Austin, Texas, April 15, 2019 (Flickr.com/Jay Goodwin).

## Feeling the Consequences of Power

*Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing*

by Robert A. Caro. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. Hardcover, 207 pp., USD\$25.

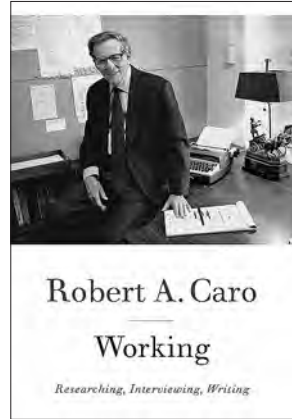
Reviewed by Bill Reynolds, Ryerson University, Canada

At the age of eighty-three, historian Robert Caro has written a book about methodology. Why Caro would set aside work on the fifth and final installment of his colossal study of Lyndon Johnson's life and career—and, not incidentally, Caro's history of twentieth-century America as seen through the prism of the thirty-sixth American president's life—at this juncture, in 2019, is explained this way: he says he has a lot to say about writing, in case anyone happened to be interested, and he “decided that, just in case, I'd put some of them down on paper now” (xxiv). Carpe diem, pick up the pace, time waits for no one, et cetera, et cetera.

Except, over his long and successful career, this is exactly what Caro has *not* done. To say his books are heavily researched is like saying Beethoven's compositions are well constructed. According to Caro, this was not simply part of the territory, it was the only trajectory his storytelling process could take. The truth takes time because the truth requires documentation, and, alas, finding those documents can take some doing.

After Caro became a freshly minted Princeton graduate (1957) and started to settle into his first long-term journalism job, junior reporter for Long Island's *Newsday*, he ran into a managing editor, Alan Hathway, who held a prejudice against Ivy League journalists. Hathway did not believe they were capable of working hard, or at least to his standard. Caro proved his boss wrong when he received some documents and pored over them, overnight and through the weekend, documents that, once understood and seen a certain way, proved that certain corporate executives who were on friendly terms with Federal Aviation Administration officials were more concerned about converting Mitchell Field, a former military base, into their own airstrip for getting in and out of Long Island, rather than watch Nassau County Community College, attended by low-income residents of Hempstead, receive a permanent home. It was then that Hathway, so cool toward the young reporter who had been hired while he had been away on vacation, realized that he might have a serious investigative journalist to mould. He advised Caro: “Turn every page. Never assume anything. Turn every goddamned page (11).”

This might explain why it took Caro seven years to write *The Power Broker* (1974), his first book, about the public servant Robert Moses, who oversaw the construction of the bridges and highways of modern New York and surrounding environs. And



it took another eight years to produce the first volume of his projected multi-book Johnson study, *The Path to Power* (1982). And another eight years to produce volume two, *Means of Ascent* (1990). And another twelve years to finish volume three, *Master of the Senate* (2002). And another ten years to complete volume four, *The Passage of Power*. That was where the tally stood in 2012. Four volumes down, one to go.

And now, seven years later, Caro is still four down, one to go, still working with the documents, still searching for the evidence, for that final, seemingly elusive book about Johnson's Vietnam years and subsequent downfall. As for time and the problem of its shortage, he responds this way to journalists who enquire about his pace and the ability to finish in, ahem, time: "Well, I *can* do that math" (xxiv).

In Spring 2012, the *New Yorker* published "The Transition," an excerpt from *The Passage of Power* that was engrossing not only as history, but also as a piece of literary journalism. Caro reconstructed the story of exactly what happened to Johnson after President Kennedy was shot in Dallas, placing the reader in the back seat of the second presidential limousine, relaying action almost as if in real time. In so doing, this microscopic tick-tock takes the reader, in excruciating and fascinating detail, through the nuances of the transfer of power—one man's lifeforce ebbing away as the other's status of feckless vice president is transformed, in a few hours, into steely commander-in-chief at the center of a maelstrom.

And so, as the lines of text for the final volume trickle out, its author soldiering on, almost magisterially, this little book has been made available so that readers may understand a little more about how the mind of this master storyteller works. Of course, Caro provides many other details, such as advice on how get make reluctant sources talk (listen, he volleys, in a few years no one will remember who you are if you are not in my book), and how to handle the fallout (don't worry, once the book is in print, he warns, the source and his allies will attack it). There are ironic stories about how Caro came to be represented by his agent, Lynn Nesbitt, and how he established his long working bond with his editor, Robert Gottlieb. And there are stories of pure writerly joy, such as being granted a space to work in the Frederick Lewis Allen Memorial Room at the New York Public Library. There, he ran into fellow historians who advised him that five years is not so long to be working on a book—which made him feel a lot better.

But do not be fooled by the deceptive plainness of the book's title, *Working*, because the many anecdotes and reminiscences offered here reinforce the tentative conclusion reached upon reading "The Transition": Caro may be thought of as an historian, but he thinks and works like a literary journalist.

### How Power Works

*Working* is divided logically. The sixteen-page introduction lays out the case for the book, which is, as mentioned, over a long career he has learned a few things that he would like to share. The first section proper, "Turn Every Page," provides Caro's professional origin story, describing in some detail his first serious foray into research, centering on that weekend dig through the Mitchell Field files all those decades ago: "There are certain moments in your life when you suddenly understand

something about yourself. I loved going through those files, making them yield up their secrets to me” (10).

This chapter also describes how Caro came to work on *The Power Broker*. His reporting on state government took a crucial, fateful turn when he realized that one bureaucrat, Moses, exercised more power than all of the elected politicians combined. The story he had been reporting, on politicians and their voting records, was not the real story of how power worked, and explaining the true mechanism became his life’s work. Caro realized that if he wanted to tell that, he had to find the right vehicle—the right character—through which to tell it. For local politics, Moses became that vehicle. When it came to national politics, Caro settled on Lyndon Johnson, who, as Senate Majority Leader in the 1950s, had figured out a way to make the Senate work. For instance, in 1957 Johnson had managed to push through the first civil rights bill in eighty-two years, despite the Senate itself being dominated by its “Southern Caucus,” with all of the baggage that entails.

### Feeling the Powerlessness

The next chapter, *The City-Shaper*, focuses on Robert Moses. Caro discusses a couple of instances of how Moses imposed his will on citizens, and how they related to his research and writing. One such instance occurred in the 1950s, when Moses’s decision as to how exactly to route the Cross-Bronx Expressway would doom a neighborhood. East Tremont had been a working-class enclave consisting of mostly Jewish but also Irish and German people, most of whom were living a decent enough life in a vibrant community. Moses ordered the destruction of fifty-four six- and seven-storey apartment houses in a mile-long stretch, which displaced thousands of families and forced them to new and, inevitably, worse locations. Caro wanted to write about the vast political power of one man, of how radically he reshaped America’s largest city, but he also wanted the reader to feel the effect of that power on the vulnerable. As he says of farmers whose fields were cleaved by one of Moses’s Long Island highways, “. . . Robert Moses’ pencil going one way instead of another, not because of engineering considerations but because of calculations in which the key factor was power—had had profound consequences on the lives of men and women like those farmers whose homes were just tiny dots on Moses’ big maps” (60). Caro came to be convinced that “To really show political power, you had to show the effect of power on the powerless, and show it fully enough so the reader could feel it” (61).

And indeed, the reader does feel the pain of the powerless. Caro finds people who used to live in East Tremont, whose lives were made far worse by eviction notices and the impending arrival of an expressway—one that could have been plotted out two blocks away and affected far fewer people but for politicians’ special interests there. And he finds farmers who struggled to clear land and build a decent working farm and then helplessly watch their hard work ploughed under, all because of Moses’s line drawn on his map—a line that represented an odd-looking detour that could be explained only in terms of old money not willing to entertain the idea of a highway anywhere near their pieces of paradise.

### When in Hill Country

In the lengthier Lyndon Johnson chapters, Caro details how his archival searches led him to understand the original source of LBJ's power back in 1940: oil money donations to the Democratic Party with the string attached that any politician who wanted to access the funds for campaign purposes had to go through Johnson first.

Beyond sifting through the endless boxes in the Johnson archives—so many documents that he and his wife, Ina, his lifelong research assistant, could not possibly read them all—Caro realized that he had to go to the place where Johnson grew up, the Hill Country in Texas, near San Antonio. Once there, he talked to as many people about LJB as he could. Unfortunately, the locals would repeat the same old stories about the local boy who became president and nothing more. Or they would say, “Well, that’s not quite what happened” (103) but never volunteer what really happened. Eventually, Caro and his wife made the not-insignificant decision to pick up and move to the Hill Country, where they resided for three years—now that’s immersion! Once people began to see the couple as neighbors, not parachutists from New York City, more details about LBJ’s life came forth. The Caros were no longer “portable journalists” (103) out for a quote and a story.

Caro wasn’t above creating scenes. He recounts the drama of how he set up Sam Houston Johnson, Lyndon’s alcoholic, tale-spinning younger brother, in the museum called Boyhood Home of LBJ, on Elm Street in Johnson City. Caro had Sam Houston sit at the dining room table, where he had sat as a child, and recreate those terrible fights between his older brother and Sam Ealy Johnson, his father. And he enticed Sam Houston to admit that the stories about the brothers as kids, the ones he had been telling for years and years, could not be recreated because, well, because they did not happen. And then, with more prompting, Sam Houston began to tell Caro stories that really happened. All the while, inside this nonfiction book about another nonfiction book, the reader is transported to the Johnson family dining room, feeling the intense animosity between Lyndon and Sam Ealy, almost viewing it as film footage.

### **Citizen Anxiety**

Another example of Caro’s approach that demonstrates his fidelity to literary journalism is when he discusses Senate Majority Leader Johnson’s successful guidance of a civil rights bill in 1957, a bill that made it easier for Black citizens to vote. He says, “I wanted to briefly show in the opening pages of the book—and make the reader understand and *feel* right at the beginning—how hard it had been for a black person to register to vote, let alone to actually cast a vote, in the South before 1957. . .” (125). As with the Moses biography, Caro detailed the career of a most powerful man, but also wanted to show the impact of that power on ordinary people. In this case, Caro looked at the testimony of Black citizens who had been denied the right to register to vote. He found his character, a thirty-eight-year-old woman named Margaret Frost from Eufala, Alabama. Frost’s story resonated with Caro—she had been humiliated at a hearing in front of the Barbour County Board of Registrars, not once but twice, and been told, even though she was sure she had answered the questions correctly, “You all go home and study a little more” (125). Caro decided to telephone

Frost and ask a few specific questions. He was hoping to flesh out a scene, and he got one. The room was sparsely furnished. The applicants stood in front of the board. The three registrars stood as well, because the hearing was not going to take long. And he got Frost's amazing summation of the scene: "You could see in their eyes they were laughing at us" (126).

But then, as often happens, Caro wondered if there might be more. He decided to contact Frost's husband, David, and he was glad he did. David had managed to register to vote but once he had, white people soured on him. "And when whites heard what he was planning to actually cast a ballot on Election Day, he said, a car had pulled up in front of his house, and the men in it had shot out the lights on his porch. He had thought of calling the police, but as the car drove away, he saw that it was a police car" (127–28). David Frost also proved invaluable in explaining other tactics employed by whites to keep Blacks from voting.

And so, for Caro, and us, it has paid off handsomely to invest the time and do one more interview. But, like this review, there is only one hitch: when to stop. Caro tells so many excellent stories in *Working*, this review could go on and on. As for Caro and research and when to stop asking questions, he says: "Of course there was more. If you ask the right questions, there always is. That's the problem" (128).

Here's hoping Caro asks many more questions—but maybe not too many more.