



Christopher Buckley, the author, talks about his famous parents and loss (the kind all grown children face) in "Losing Mum and Pup."

'Mum and pup' remembered

Christopher Buckley talks about growing up the son of a conservative icon

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

6/19/09

As Class Speaker for Yale's graduating class of 2009, the satirist Christopher Buckley thanked them and their generation for coming up with the word "whatever."

"There is no philosophical statement, asseveration, dogma, or assertion," he said, "that cannot be stopped dead in its tracks by an American teenager with an iPod saying 'whatever.'"

"Our generation didn't have that word," the genial flaxen-haired 56-year-old known as "Christo" lamented to a crowd of 160 later that night at Branford's Owenego Inn on an evening dramatized by driving rain and a tornado warning.

It was the tempestuous weather that occasioned Buckley to recount the last sail he and his father, conservative icon William F. Buckley, Jr., or "Pup," as his son called him, would take together, in October 1997.

Christopher, best known as the author of comic novels about Washington's power elite, was taking the Acela train to the Buckley estate in Stamford from his home in D.C. for an overnight sail. The glitch: the gray, stormy skies, bending trees, and blustery northeasterly winds that he had been tracking throughout his ride north.

"To anyone who's grown up along the Connecticut seashore," Buckley said in his upper-crust drawl, "nor'easter is not a word ordinarily associated with 'overnight sail.'"

Then again, the elder Buckley was anything but ordinary, his son attested. Neither loose objects blowing about in the railroad parking lot nor, as they would learn, massive power outages nor, indeed, the state of emergency declared by various governors in New England, would deter the captain of the American Right and founder of the political magazine "National Review" from his plan.

"We'll have a brisk sail," he casually told his son.

They made it across Long Island Sound,

Buckley reported, amid "screaming, dark night and 15 foot seas" and Buckley wondering to himself "What the f— am I doing out here?" "Never again," he wrote his father a few days later, having at last collected himself.

As the boyish, preppily-clad Buckley would come to recognize, "great men have their own set of rules. Great men take great risks. It's the timorous souls — souls like myself — who err on the side of caution; who take in sail when they see a storm approaching and look for snug harbor."

As much as his legendarily contrarian father — and his tart-tongued socialite mother Pat Buckley — exasperated him, Christopher remained, despite periods of strife and estrangement, largely a devoted son. As he recounts in his affecting new memoir "Losing Mum and Pup," this was no more true than when it fell upon him, as their only child, to care for them as each struggled with various illnesses and eventually succumbed, Pat in April 2007 and Bill in February 2008.

As testimony to what the "larger-than-life" Pat and Bill Buckley were really like, the book proves once again that every family, no matter its wealth, social standing, or celebrity, has in its history scandals that only an insider can reveal. Take his mother's famously withering rudeness: she once chased off her granddaughter's close friend, a member of the Kennedy clan, Buckley said, with an unprovoked disquisition on the Martha Moxley murder case (in which the Kennedy cousin was convicted).

Then there's Buckley père's acid reaction to his son's novel "Boomsday," which proposed mass suicide by aging boomers to save Social Security from fiscal ruin. Despite Boomsday's commercial and critical success, the senior Buckley, increasingly cantankerous with age, e-mailed his son, "This one didn't work for me. Sorry."

While some have questioned the lurid granularity with which he documents his revered parents' sad decline, the current editor-at-large of "ForbesLife" Magazine insisted he was at peace with his work. Yes, his

mother and father would have been appalled he acknowledged. And some people may not like some of it. But it is, ultimately, an honest book.

"They were complex people — hell, every set of parents is complex," he said. "They just occupied a slightly larger stage."

Above all, as he puts it at the beginning of the memoir, "I'm a writer . . . and when the universe hands you material like this, not writing about it seems either a waste or a conscious act of evasion."

Still, "Park Avenue's Frank McCourt," as Buckley dubbed himself, demurs at the suggestion that he has anything useful or profound to share on the topic of being a baby boomer orphan. Even so, the memoir is also, perhaps unwittingly, a primer on illness, decline, and bereavement. Among other things, he chronicles the sharp reversal of roles as a parent suffers and dies — at one point he found himself lecturing his father on drug use — and the predicament of how much to say or hold back when seeing your mother or father for the last time.

Not to mention the bureaucratic nightmares that accompany a parent's death. Bemoaning the itemizations totaling \$7,000 for his mother's cremation assessed by a Stamford funeral home, the novel quipped: "we were looking for a little cremation, not a full-sized Viking funeral." A year later, while writing "Losing Mum and Pup," he learned that his friend, the writer and editor Rust Hills, had died in Belfast, Maine. The total cost of his cremation: \$800.

The most sage advice he could impart to adult children coping with the loss of their parents, he said in conclusion, were the words he uttered to his wife when he rang her shortly thereafter: "When I start to fail, get me to Belfast."

In response to the audience's gales of laughter, Buckley shrugged his shoulders, a wry smile on his face. One suspects that, had he been about four decades younger, the next word out of his mouth would have been "whatever."