To Afflict the Comfortable
By Richard Lingeman

WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN JR.
A Holy Impatience
By Warren Goldstein

In his prime, Warren Goldstein writes, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr. was "physically imposing, athletic, and trim... a tough guy who could drink hard and face anyone down." He was fiercely competitive, used profanity, had extramarital affairs, engaged in political action, courted celebrity. Superficially, then, a bit like Sinclair Lewis's fictional evangelist Elmer Gantry. But Elmer Gantry was corrupt, a rank hypocrite, and William Sloane Coffin was and is far from that. As Goldstein, the chairman of the history department at the University of Hartford, demonstrates in his able and exhaustively researched biography, William Sloane Coffin Jr., Coffin was a passionate advocate for social justice. He tested in the political arena a faith based on the "neo-orthodox Christianity" of Reinhold Niebuhr combined with the Gandhian social gospel of Martin Luther King, Jr.

In his heyday in the 1960s and 70s, Coffin's prominence rivaled that of the abolitionist divines. Next to King, Goldstein writes, he has been "the most significant liberal religious voice in the United States for the past 40 years." Yet this religious rebel bore an impeccable pedigree. His paternal grandmother belonged to the W. & J. Sloane furniture company family. The Coffins, who had amassed wealth in their own right, were pillars of the Presbyterian Church and staunch sons of Yale. His mother, Catherine, was an unconventional young woman who left Kansas City to live in prewar Greenwich Village. She and her husband, Will, instilled in their second son a mix of noblesse oblige and Progressive-era idealism.

William, Jr. was born in 1924 to cosseted comfort. But his father died suddenly in 1933, with most of his wealth tied up in depressed New York real estate. Catherine moved to Carmel, Calif., where she made a new life. She was "a driving presence" in Bill's life, Goldstein says, the very picture of a fiercely controlling WASP lioness. Uncle Henry paid for Bill's education at Deerfield and Yale, so aside from a youthful interlude in Paris as a piano prodigy, he stayed planted on the Establishment track. Drafted in 1943, he loved soldiering. After officers' candidate school, he shipped out to France, where he joined a Russian language program in military intelligence. He was assigned to a unit that forcibly repatriated Soviet prisoners, consigned by a vengeful Stalin to execution or Siberia. He later had pangs of conscience; the experience made him a hard-line anti-Communist.

While overseas he enjoyed his first real love affair, with a Russian emigre in Paris. It ended abruptly. Probably Coffin knew that the girl would never gain Catherine's approval. His emotional closeness to his mother, Goldstein theorizes, crippled his ability to love. But Catherine did imbue him with the self-confidence of a mother's favorite. Add the sense of entitlement of his social class, and you have the makings of a supremely confident man who always claimed center stage.

When Coffin came home, his career choice came down to entering the ministry or enlisting in the Central Intelligence Agency (during the Korean War, he did a cloak-and-dagger stint with the C.I.A. and loved it). He had sought answers in religion after the war, and the tipping point came when he heard Niebuhr speak. The great theologian's teachings mingled tough-minded realism with a tragic sense of life and the sinfulness of humanity. Union Theological Seminary's ministry among the poor pointed him toward Social Gospel Christianity, though his calling would be to afflict the comfortable in academe rather than comforting the afflicted in East Harlem. After divinity school and stints at Andover and Williams College, he was appointed chaplain of Yale, "the only job I really want to do." From his campus bully pulpit, he exhorted the quiescent 1950s students to be part of the passion and action of their times.

The Freedom Rides of the early 60s stirred Coffin's conscience. He heeded King's call to lend Establishment legitimacy to the cause and got himself arrested in Montgomery, Ala. King and the Rev.
Ralph Abernathy taught him the necessity of nonviolently confronting the white power structure to leverage change. As he later said, peace is “never the absence of tension but the presence of justice.”

In 1965, as Lyndon Johnson marched the nation deeper into the Big Muddy, Coffin decided this was an arrogant, prideful war and helped organize Clergy Concerned About Vietnam. He became a vocal figure in the draft resistance movement and urged civil disobedience. He and four other antiwar activists (including Dr. Benjamin Spock) challenged various provisions of the Selective Service Act. They were tried in 1968, and Coffin, who wanted to fill the prisons with resisters, was found guilty. But his lawyer won him a new trial, and the government dropped the case.

Goldstein covers Coffin’s movement career thoroughly but does not really evoke the color and dissonant emotions of those tumultuous times. He calls Coffin, not pejoratively, a “religious celebrity,” who used publicity to advance the cause. He also traces in painful detail how Coffin’s private relationships suffered as his celebrity grew. His two marriages ended in bitter divorces. Coffin, Goldstein dryly concludes, was “emotionally sustained by his public roles—not his role as a husband, partner or father.”

By 1974, Coffin, burned out, his second marriage on the rocks, left Yale for Vermont to write his autobiography. There he met his third wife, a down-to-earth woman who admired his work and learned to live with the fallible private man. He re-entered the limelight in 1977, when he was called to the very visible pulpit of Riverside Church in New York City. He led his flock into the red-hot center of the antinuclear movement and further stirred up the sanctified by preaching a sermon for full acceptance of homosexuals. His conservative parishioners, many of them black, were in a state of open rebellion, but Coffin calmed the troubled waters. In July 1987 he became president of SANE/Freeze, moving on after three years to a busy retirement. Now nearing 80, he is slowed by two strokes.

Warren Goldstein has achieved the difficult task of depicting fairly a life storm-tossed by religious and political controversy. I wish he had assessed more fully the ambiguities of Coffin’s religiously inspired activism. I could have done with fewer summaries of what I had already been told. But all credit to him for keeping a steady, illuminating light trained on the man, his private pain and courageous public career. Reading this book makes me ask, where is Coffin’s like today?

Richard Lingeman, the author of biographies of Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, is a senior editor at The Nation.


WOMEN WHO WALK WITH THE SKY

Dawn Renee Levesque
Polar Bear & Company

By Margaret Wither

In her children’s book, Women Who Walk With the Sky, Dawn Renee Levesque (HAS ’82) tells eight tales inspired by Native American myths from numerous tribes. The mother of a young son, Levesque began researching myths and writing legends to help explain to her child the connections between all living things. Her stories feature a strong female central character, an emphasis on the beauty of nature, and elements of the celestial world. In these tales, the forces of the heavens are often out of balance because people have overreached or angered the spirits.

Levesque’s heroines learn to be careful in dealing with nature, or else, pay the price. In the magical world where these stories take place, the sun, moon, wind, and water all have personalities. The first story in the collection, “Moon Woman,” is based on a South Seas legend about the Woman in the Moon (rather than the more familiar Man in the Moon). Rona, a young woman, criticizes the moon for slipping behind a cloud and causing her to fall in the darkness. In response, the angry moon grabs Rona and her water bucket, and she disappears, never to return. According to the story, whenever it rains, it is because Rona has tipped her water bucket.

Drought and a scorched earth are the consequences in one story when a foolish granddaughter replaces her weary grandmother in the task of carrying the sun on her back from east to west. A young girl in “Blowing Away the Wind” apologizes to the Wind Spirit, who has been angered by the people of her village, and convinces it to return and blow more gently.

Some of the myths explain the origins of the earth’s gifts. “Sky Fills the Heart” tells the source of the color azure blue. The Bear constellation appears in the sky when the maiden Lolotea chases a bear cub up a tree in “Chasing Little Bear.” In “Star and Lily,” a star comes to earth and leaves behind as a reminder the beautiful water lily. In “The Mist Maiden,” the title character brings from her island in the sky corn kernels to plant and sewing skills for the village artisans. Cooling rains break a terrible drought and bring relief to villagers when the Wind Spirit blows cotton bolls into the sky to form rain clouds in “The Cloud Gatherers.”

Women Who Walk With The Sky is illustrated by Ramona du Houx, who is part Native American. Dawn Levesque, who received a B.F.A. in photography from the Hartford Art School, has had exhibits of her work shown in London as well as in the United States. Her travel and fashion photography have appeared in national and international magazines and newspapers. She currently lives in Ohio with her family.

For ordering information, visit www.polarbearandco.com.