

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

COLD

MOUNTAIN

A NOVEL



CHARLES FRAZIER

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the shadow of a crow

At the first gesture of morning, flies began stirring. Inman's eyes and the long wound at his neck drew them, and the sound of their wings and the touch of their feet were soon more potent than a yardful of roosters in rousing a man to wake. So he came to yet one more day in the hospital ward. He flapped the flies away with his hands and looked across the foot of his bed to an open triple-hung window. Ordinarily he could see to the red road and the oak tree and the low brick wall. And beyond them to a sweep of fields and flat piney woods that stretched to the western horizon. The view was a long one for the flatlands, the hospital having been built on the only swell within eyeshot. But it was too early yet for a vista. The window might as well have been painted grey.

Had it not been too dim, Inman would have read to pass the time until breakfast, for the book he was reading had the effect of settling his mind. But he had burned up the last of his own candles reading to bring sleep the night before, and lamp oil was too scarce to be striking the hospital's lights for mere diversion. So he rose and dressed and sat in a ladderback chair, putting the

gloomy room of beds and their broken occupants behind him. He flapped again at the flies and looked out the window at the first smear of foggy dawn and waited for the world to begin shaping up outside.

The window was tall as a door, and he had imagined many times that it would open onto some other place and let him walk through and be there. During his first weeks in the hospital, he had been hardly able to move his head, and all that kept his mind occupied had been watching out the window and picturing the old green places he recollected from home. Childhood places. The damp creek bank where Indian pipes grew. The corner of a meadow favored by brown-and-black caterpillars in the fall. A hickory limb that overhung the lane, and from which he often watched his father driving cows down to the barn at dusk. They would pass underneath him, and then he would close his eyes and listen as the cupping sound of their hooves in the dirt grew fainter and fainter until it vanished into the calls of katydids and peepers. The window apparently wanted only to take his thoughts back. Which was fine with him, for he had seen the metal face of the age and had been so stunned by it that when he thought into the future, all he could vision was a world from which everything he counted important had been banished or had willingly fled.

By now he had stared at the window all through a late summer so hot and wet that the air both day and night felt like breathing through a dishrag, so damp it caused fresh sheets to sour under him and tiny black mushrooms to grow overnight from the limp pages of the book on his bedside table. Inman suspected that after such long examination, the grey window had finally said about all it had to say. That morning, though, it surprised him, for it brought to mind a lost memory of sitting in school, a similar tall window beside him framing a scene of pastures and low green ridges terracing up to the vast hump of Cold Mountain. It was September. The hayfield beyond the beaten dirt of the school playground stood pant-waist high, and the

heads of grasses were turning yellow from need of cutting. The teacher was a round little man, hairless and pink of face. He owned but one rusty black suit of clothes and a pair of old over-large dress boots that curled up at the toes and were so worn down that the heels were wedgelike. He stood at the front of the room rocking on the points. He talked at length through the morning about history, teaching the older students of grand wars fought in ancient England.

After a time of actively not listening, the young Inman had taken his hat from under the desk and held it by its brim. He flipped his wrist, and the hat skimmed out the window and caught an updraft and soared. It landed far out across the playground at the edge of the hayfield and rested there black as the shadow of a crow squatted on the ground. The teacher saw what Inman had done and told him to go get it and to come back and take his whipping. The man had a big paddleboard with holes augered in it, and he liked to use it. Inman never did know what seized him at that moment, but he stepped out the door and set the hat on his head at a dapper rake and walked away, never to return.

The memory passed on as the light from the window rose toward day. The man in the bed next to Inman's sat and drew his crutches to him. As he did every morning, the man went to the window and spit repeatedly and with great effort until his clogged lungs were clear. He ran a comb through his black hair, which hung lank below his jaw and was cut square around. He tucked the long front pieces of hair behind his ears and put on his spectacles of smoked glass, which he wore even in the dim of morning, his eyes apparently too weak for the wannest form of light. Then, still in his nightshirt, he went to his table and began working at a pile of papers. He seldom spoke more than a word or two at a time, and Inman had learned little more of him than that his name was Balis and that before the war he had been to school at Chapel Hill, where he had attempted to master Greek. All his waking time was now spent trying to render ancient

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