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Robert Coles, child advocate

Harvard professor's best-selling books explore young hearts and souls

BY MARY B. W. TABOR

The writer is with *The New York Times.*

DURHAM, N. C. — It was a quiet, gray winter afternoon, when only an occasional passing car or rustle of underbrush broke the silence of the surrounding pines, and Robert Coles was standing at his front door, pleading gently with his black spaniel to stop barking at the newly arrived guests.

"Come in, come in," he said, an apologetic smile softening heavy brows. He knelt to calm his dog, his worn corduroys, ratty green sweater and disheveled hair suggesting more the rumpled graduate student than the noted psychiatrist, Pulitzer-Prize-winning author and Harvard professor that he is. Then he led his visitors into a makeshift study overlooking trees outside his temporary home a few miles from Duke University, where he is teaching this semester.

"Please, sit where you are most comfortable," he said. "How are you? How was your trip? I was worried."

Such ease with strangers has no doubt been among Coles' most valuable assets in the last 35 years as he has traveled the world, from South African townships to Alaskan fishing villages, with tape recorder and crayons in hand, asking thousands of children to talk and draw about religion and politics, about matters of the heart and soul.

By weaving their stories into a flood of essays, articles and books, Coles has established himself as a pioneer in children's oral history.

"His interviews have been not only essential but quintessential in the most classic definition of the word," said Joyce L. Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University.

At the same time Coles, who has made moral questioning and community service a way of life, has become a Pied Piper of social consciousness for at least two generations of college students.

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In his 55th and latest book, *The Moral Intelligence of Children* (Random House), Coles draws on his entire body of work as well as his classroom experiences. He describes it as his last book about children. "There's no further aspect I want to explore," he said.

He writes in the first chapter, "This book is about the way character develops in the young; about the way they obtain their values, about what makes a good person and about how we might help shape a child's moral intelligence."

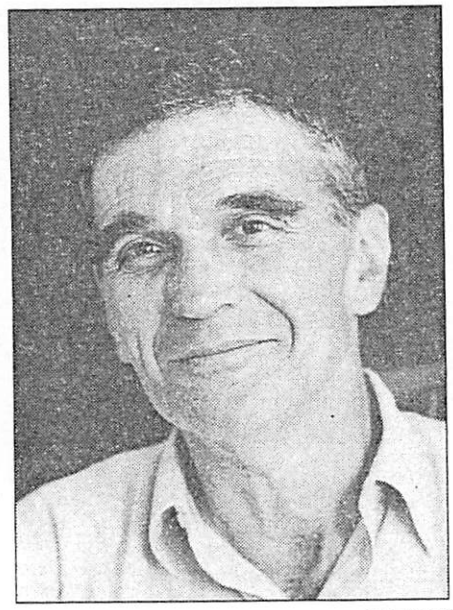
At 67, this unconventional child psychiatrist still sees himself, like the children he profiles, as a work in progress. Replete with contradictions, he is a prolific author who never meant to write, a model for adults whose own inspiration is children and a straight arrow who embraces what he calls his "rebelliousness." "I've just always been like this," he said. "I don't know why."

Coles has his critics — namely, those who complain that his work is disorganized, lacks scientific precision, avoids tough questions and recycles material.

But if writing about morality or child-rearing requires some measure of self-criticism, he has mastered the form. He eagerly notes his own inconsistencies and lapses. By his own admission, for example, he has purposely avoided the language of psychiatry in his writings.

As a parent, he says, he was sometimes so distracted with work and volunteering that he did not spend as much time with his three sons and wife as he would have liked. (Daniel Coles, 30, his middle son and a new doctor, describes his father as always willing to take time out for his family — to go apple-picking near their home in Concord, Mass., or to play a game of catch.)

And while Robert Coles writes about poor children and volunteers as a tutor in poor school districts, he acknowledges a privileged existence, which includes his Concord farmhouse and an expensive car. He sent his own sons to private schools. All this has contributed to a sense of "moral anxiety" that surfaces in his teachings and writings.



FILE PHOTO

Robert Coles at 67: Still learning about how children cope with the world.

"I work with very vulnerable people, and yet I'm not very vulnerable myself," he said. "It makes me uncomfortable, seeing the disparities between the world I document and the world I inhabit."

But that tension seems to keep him going. Coles still likes to mountain-bike in the New England woods, drive fast and listen to Bruce Springsteen. (A snapshot on a bulletin board next to his desk shows him standing with his arm around the Boss, a grin on his face and a bottle of Jack Daniels in hand. Also on the board are photographs of those who have molded his moral sensibilities, among them William Carlos Williams, Walker Percy and Anna Freud.)

Morality and service are themes rooted in Coles' childhood in Boston and in his early relationship with his parents. His father, Philip, an engineer, and his mother, Sandra Young Coles, an English teacher, were both avid readers and made a daily practice of reading the novels of Hardy, Eliot and Dickens to each other.

In 1946, Coles began at Harvard with plans to become an English teacher. But by his senior year, after meeting Williams, the poet and doctor, and following him on rounds to see patients, he had changed his mind and headed to Columbia University for medical school.

See ROBERT COLES
Page 4, col. 1, this section

ROBERT COLES, CHILD ADVOCATE

Continued from Page D 1

After beginning in pediatrics, he decided he was not "tough enough" to give shots.

"The child would cry," Coles said, "and I would try to comfort him, and then I would be fighting back my own tears."

So at the urging of Williams, he turned to child psychiatry.

But his passion for literature remained intact.

For almost 20 years now, Coles has taught an undergraduate course at Harvard entitled "The Literature of Social Reflection," a perennial favorite in which he explores the work of great moralist writers, from Tolstoy to Tillie Olsen. Listed as "General Education 105," it is known among students as "Guilt 105."

Coles, who was recently named the James Agee Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard, has also taught courses at Harvard law, business, medical and education schools, where he has developed a devoted following. His informal lectures are replete with personal anecdotes and references to books, movies, music and art.

Coles has many admirers. James Freedman, president of Dartmouth College, refers to him as "a rare, rare American" who was "the decisive influence" in the moral development of Freedman's son, Jared.

And Eleanor Cunningham Cary, 37, a former student and full-time mother who now commutes from Dover, Mass., as one of Coles' teaching assistants at Harvard, said, "Unlike any other course at Harvard, Coles' courses connect with the question of how to live a life."

There have been career kudos, too. In addition to a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for two books in his series *Children of Crisis* (Atlantic/Little Brown), he has won numerous awards, including, in 1981, a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, or so-called genius grant, of $248,000 over five years, and his book *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Houghton Mifflin, 1990) became a best seller.

Many authors would revel in such success. But he remains restless.

He rises each morning at 5 a.m. to write, not on a computer ("I can't even type") but on yellow legal pads, searching for new ways to convey what he sees as truths derived from his interviews. He teaches, at Harvard in the fall term and at Duke and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the spring. And he volunteers as a teacher in local schools several hours each week.

"I'm so tired, so exhausted," he admitted, rubbing his face.

Yet constantly on his mind is the promise made to his wife, Jane Hallowell Coles, an English teacher who died in 1993, to continue the work they began together in 1961.

That year, while working as an Air Force physician, Coles by chance saw a 6-year-old black girl being heckled as schools were integrated in New Orleans. The girl, Ruby Bridges, stopped, not to yell back but to pray — a sight Coles still says was one of the most moving of his life.

At his wife's urging, the young psychiatrist put aside plans for a private practice and began interviewing other children involved in school integration. That led to years of involvement in the civil rights movement in the South and advising Robert F. Kennedy on racial and education issues.

"Everything I did had to do with my wife's initiative and her moral energy," Coles said. "So all the things I am doing now I regard as an effort to complete suggestions, initiatives and projects that she and I discussed over our 35 years of marriage." His high, raspy voice tightened. "When I lost her," he said, "I lost not only my wife and the mother of my children. I lost my co-worker."