

## Profile on Studs Terkel for The Boston Globe

THE NATION;

AT 88, TERKEL CONFRONTS THE END

BYLINE: By Lori Rotenberk, Globe Correspondent

SECTION: NATIONAL/FOREIGN; Pg. A2

LENGTH: 1014 words

CHICAGO - Studs Terkel points toward the front door of his home and yells at an imagined visitor he hopes will never make it up the stoop.

"Death, stay away from my door!" shouts the 88-year-old oral historian, as strands of white hair stand on end.

It's a fitting day for such a warning. The howling wind rattles the windows, and a book that Terkel thinks could be his last has just been completed and sits in rubber band-bound stacks on a table.

For more than 30 years, this Pulitzer Prize-winning author has chronicled the lives of average Americans in such books as "Working," "The Good War," and "Race." Now, he has written a book about death, but he says it's the ultimate book about life.

"It's done," he says, slapping the title page with a crack. "Death. I wrote a book about the end, the experience we will have to share, but the one none of us has yet to experience, and what does it turn out being all about? Living!" Terkel exclaims.

Some 400 pages long and consisting of more than 60 interviews, the book is by far Terkel's most personal and bittersweet work. Last December, while Terkel was still mulling over the merits of pursuing the book, Ida, his wife and companion of more than 60 years, died after heart surgery.

Framed photos of Ida sit on a sideboard in the dining room. "Her dying played a major role in my doing the book," says Terkel, holding a photo of a smiling Ida. "It was on my mind before she died, and I admit writing the book was a bit of grief therapy for me. But in the end, it made me realize many regrets. I live a life that is guilt-ridden."

Terkel still can't bring himself to talk much about her, but admits that he talks to her daily.

"See those daisies?" he asks, pointing to a dozen in a vase by the window. "Those are for her. And Ida is there in the urn. When I hear something interesting in the news, I call out to her, 'So what do you think of that, kid?' And if I think of a good line, I try it out on her first."

Cantankerous, sometimes contrarian, and nearly always to the extreme left in his politics, the raspy-voiced Terkel typically has worn a tough exterior. Ida's death opened a trove of buried emotions for the Chicago literary legend, who still rides buses into the city, lists his number in the phone book, and is frequently seen hurrying down Michigan Avenue in conversation with pedestrians.

"I idolize him because I love his books," says nationally syndicated radio host Ira Glass. "There is something about the emotion and history and sweep of those books that is really special and unusual. It's like he created his own genre and made it clear to the world how interesting the stories of everyday people could be."

Glass adds: "His aesthetic influenced not only writers and filmmakers; it is an entire way of seeing the mission of journalism."

The new book, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Reflection on Death, Rebirth and Hunger for a Faith," is scheduled for release by The New Press this fall.

The subjects include a doctor, a police officer, a woman with breast cancer, and an undertaker, to name a few. They discuss everything from religion to their ideas about the hereafter, to a near-death experience.

In his introduction, Terkel writes of a lifelong sprint from death that began when he was a boy in the family's blue-collar rooming house in Chicago. Asthmatic and sickly, Terkel feared dying in his sleep.

To fend off death, he made it a point to not fall asleep with his hands clasped together over his chest. He became an insomniac at an early age, and in later years tried to lull himself to sleep by reciting lists and poems.

"At first, I counted the celebrated names of baseball, but sleeplessness came again," Terkel says. "At 13, I learned 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and I sacked out. But at 88, the words have lost their charm, and now I fall asleep reciting the names (Nelson Algren, Mike Royko, and others) of my departed friends."

Terkel drew his first audience as a boy venting his political views from a wooden soapbox in Bughouse Square, a small city park. After graduating with a law degree from the University of Chicago, Terkel fled the legal profession in favor of acting and became a local radio personality.

He began by playing gangsters on radio dramas, later obtained his own television show, "Studs' Place," and until recently hosted interviews on a fine arts radio station.

Nowadays he is a tenured staff member of the Chicago Historical Society, where he spends some of his days cataloging his tape library for the society's archives.

Most other days, however, he dines with neighbors or pecks away with two fingers at his electric Smith Corona typewriter that sits on a narrow desk

in a second-floor office at his home. Though he underwent quintuple-bypass surgery in 1996, his health is generally good, and he has a couple of cigars and martinis daily.

Terkel says he works diligently to fill the void left by Ida. His once-strained relationship with their son, Dan, has mended.

"We have gotten a lot closer since my mother's passing than we were before," says Dan Terkell, who changed the spelling of his name years ago so that he wouldn't be identified as Terkel's son. "He's a lot more introspective, and I think he's become a lot more focused on his friends and what is left of his family."

Terkel confides: "We should have had two kids, but it was me. These are my regrets. I wasn't always there for people. Sometimes I didn't come through for people as I had promised. With Ida, I guess I strayed."

Then tears well up and slip down his face.

Come May, Terkel will turn 89. He says he's not afraid of dying, and doesn't believe in an afterlife.

"Like Gertrude Stein says, 'There's no there, there.' Nada," he says.

"Will I die? Yes. How will I die? Maybe in my sleep. At the typewriter - now that would be good. Hopefully with my boots on.

"Did Ida believe in a hereafter? No. But I know how we'll meet again. I've made plans that when I go, our ashes are going to be mixed together and spread all around Bughouse Square."