

Calvert's Crack Literary Team of Ritchie and Farnsworth

New books by each open a Bay Weekly conversation

By Sandra Olivetti Martin



Together, Elisavietta Ritchie and husband Clyde Farnsworth have written an encyclopedia of words, with more spilling out every day. Poet, storyteller, translator and mentor Ritchie has just published her 22nd (or so) book, the poetry volume *Harbingers*. Retired New York Times foreign correspondent Farnsworth has just published his fourth, the father-and-son biography and autobiography *Tangled Bylines*.

Having just traded their Washington, D.C., home for a “best possible river-view apartment in Asbury Solomons,” the Calvert County couple took a break from unpacking to share their worldly, wordly life stories.

Bay Weekly How does your story begin?

Elisavietta Ritchie I was driven to write. I was three when my babushka, my father's Russian émigré mother, wrote down — in Russian — the poems I had been speaking. I wrote my first novel at 10. I'd grown up speaking Russian to my babushka, studied at the Sorbonne after college when my parents lived in Paris. They lived all over during those years, two years here or there, and I visited.

I thought I'd go into the Foreign Service — I took the exam and passed — or be a journalist, and either way write novels with my left hand.

Bay Weekly How about your story, Clyde?

Clyde Farnsworth As a journalist? There's a chapter before that.

I had two choices. Out of Yale, I had wanted to go to law school — I was accepted at Columbia — or get into an English department, and I had applied for a Fulbright.

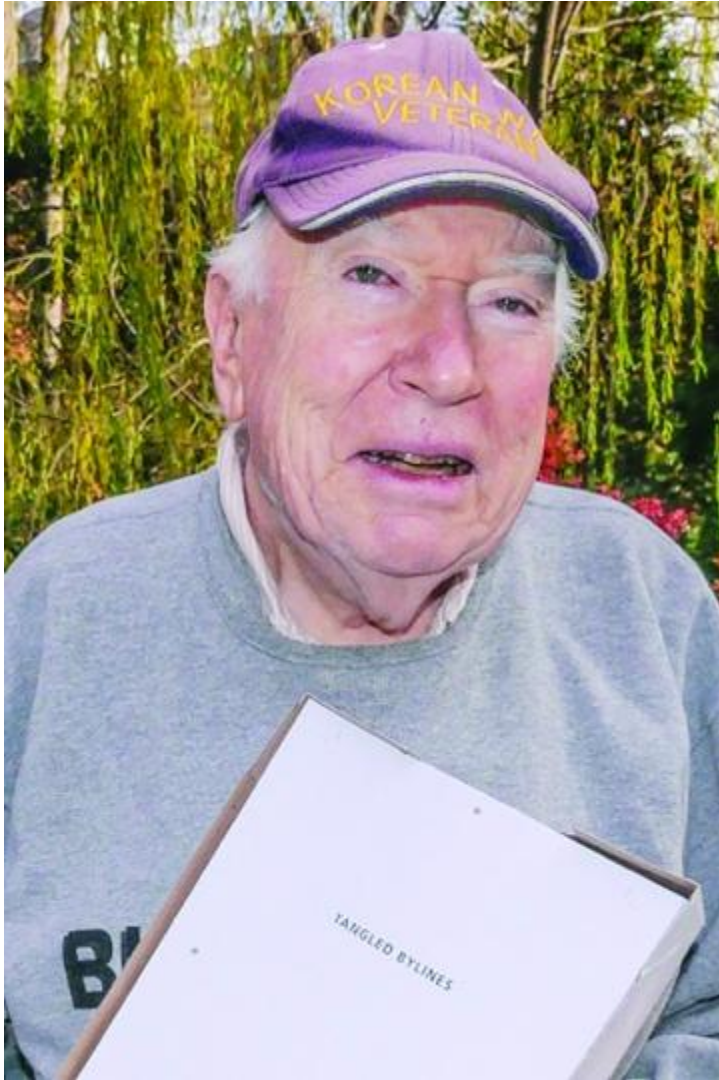
Instead, I made a financial decision. I needed to earn money to make a contribution to my mother, who was desperate for money. I joined the Army and was scrambling through 16 weeks of basic training at Fort Dix when I got the letter I'd been selected to go to Toulouse to study French literature. Instead, I went to Korea.

Bay Weekly Now the journalism chapter?

Clyde Farnsworth I took the train from my mother's home in Mount Vernon, New York, to Grand Central Station. I had written down where the newspaper offices were. The United Press was in the same building as The New York Daily News. I got there so early that the Daily News hadn't opened, so they sent me upstairs to the U.P. offices on the 12th floor.

A guy named Red Williams said sit down. I said I wanted to be a journalist. After I told my story, he sent me to the financial editor because they had an opening. I was just back from Korea and hoping to have a month or so off. My mother wanted me to paint the house. The editor, Elmer Walzer, told me to start the following Monday.

I worked there, then for the New York Herald Tribune, then 35 years for the New York Times.



Bay Weekly There's a story behind the story, and as you write in *Tangled Bylines*, it was your father ... Clyde Farnsworth Though he had left us behind, my father had a tremendous influence. Whether I was in Europe or Asia or D.C., he was always whispering in the background.

As a reporter, he covered a huge helping of the 20th century, two of the biggest events, World War II and the Chinese Revolution. It was like being a gladiator, wielding sword after sword, from Cairo, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, India, Russia to China and then South America. Then — and this is what I find so amazing — when he was practically wiped out by physical problems, he rebuilt himself in Europe, in Vienna, where he learned German reading newspapers in a coffee house, creating this amazing independent news operation.

Being a journalist was my own take on my father's life.

Bay Weekly Yet when he invited you to join his news operation out of Vienna, you refused ... Clyde Farnsworth It was 1963. What a year! I had investigated one of the all-time great swindlers, Billie Sol Estes, out of Pecos, Texas. The scandal touched the office of Vice President Lyndon Johnson. A source was Attorney General Robert Kennedy, already a master of the familiar Washington game of using the press against political foes.

The Times had given me a coveted posting to London, I was blessed with a young family and having just settled in, we had no desire to move again. Plus, Dad put me off with a warning that the Times was in severe trouble and that my best chances lay in joining forces with him.

Bay Weekly As your career turned out, your father's prediction was off ...

Clyde Farnsworth As an economic reporter, I chronicled the financial side of things in London, Brussels and Paris.

My three months in Prague, August to November 1968 — the Soviet invasion following Prague Spring — were totally different, like being back in Korea. Like the Egyptian Spring, people took to the squares demanding reforms. I was talking to people for stories on what they were thinking.

I was sleeping on the floor in the American Embassy one night when suddenly the embassy caught fire. I really did think the Russians had decided to blow it up and that World War III would be starting. It did not. Afraid the Embassy would be overrun, we were burning all our secret papers, and the furnace up in the attic overheated.

Bay Weekly Elisavietta, how about your plans?

Elisavietta Ritchie In a time when very few women were accepted as journalists, I kept trying. I had a low-level job on the San Francisco Examiner, had stories and poems published over the years in the New York Times, Washington Post and Christian Science Monitor, but not much luck with hard news. It was frustrating me not to be a full-time journalist, but I kept involved in that world writing about and translating dissident writers.

Bay Weekly Like Clyde, you married, had children and wrote your way across half the world.

Elisavietta Ritchie I was continually writing, with a few acceptances here and there and just kept going. The Washington Post's old Women's Section took me on as a replacement summer editor, and that was fun. The New York Times published my poems on the editorial page, and when I met the editor, he said send me every poem you write. What a thing to tell a young writer who had not been able to be a journalist!

Bay Weekly How did you two finally come together?

Elisavietta Ritchie In about 1978, I was just back from Malaysia and found myself on my own, living in the Wharf House at Sotterley Plantation (then a ramshackle old place) at a friend's party for Russian artists down by the Patuxent River. Clyde was at that luncheon. He was the embodiment of everybody I wanted to know. It was my dream to live the life he did.

He wrote his phone number on a matchbook, and after a long time I got the courage to call.

Bay Weekly Then you did live that life?

Elisavietta Ritchie Living in Canada and Australia together we have had that life, he writing his stories for the New York Times, I writing articles, short stories, poems and getting published. It has not been a competition, but there are very nice parallels.

Bay Weekly Eventually you settled in Washington and returned to the Patuxent River ...

Elisavietta Ritchie Much of my poetry is inspired by the Patuxent. One of my early books is *Tightening the Circle over Eel Country*, as I caught eels there, swam and paddled there, even was infected by Vibro there.

My poems are also love poems, creature poems, poems inspired by my family and Russian life in Babushka's Beads. The new insomniac poems I do at 3am will form the background of my next book, the 23rd.

I write fiction, too. The great thing about fiction is that nobody knows if it's real or invented so you can get away with all sorts of things. I have fulfilled all the parts of myself I would love to have lived.

Bay Weekly Beyond drive and constant writing, how have you managed to publish so much? It's not like you had the presses of the New York Times behind you as Clyde did.

Elisavietta Ritchie Poets turn to small presses, including Washington Writers Publishing House, where I've been poetry editor, fiction editor and off and on editor of the publishing house itself.

Bay Weekly Knowing you as I do, I'm aware that you are as avid in opening opportunities for other writers as for yourself.

Elisavietta Ritchie I was a Poet in the Schools [a Maryland State Arts Council Program], not just giving readings but encouraging people to write. I'm still teaching creative writing at Calvert Library. I am still learning. Everything excites me.

Bay Weekly It's been here that Clyde H. Farnsworth has finished his biography of his father and near namesake, Clyde A. Farnsworth.

Clyde Farnsworth This was always in my mind. I thought my father was a very special person with a story that needed to be told. He had covered so much, seen so much, I owed it to him. Even though he had been totally unfaithful to my mother, I owed it to our heritage.

About 1980, he came to live with me in Arlington. We lived and talked and he told me everything, incredible stories, the lives he had saved in China ... It was like visiting the other side of the moon.

His memory was encyclopedic. He could remember what happened, in explicit detail, so I have his very precise reconstruction of what happened. I put in the context.

Bay Weekly Eventually biography became autobiography as well.

Clyde Farnsworth My agent, Tom Wallace, said you've got to get your own story in there. Merge them together. I started writing when we went to Australia in 1997. It was published this year by the press of the University of Missouri, where there is a great journalism school.

Read more in *Tangled Bylines* and Elisavetta's many books, all available online.

[Publication Information](#)