



# Interview: Vanity Fair's Wayne Lawson, One of the Greats



By [Olivia Snaije](#)  
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Wayne Lawson with Greta Gerwig at the 2013 Oscars. Photo Justin Bishop

In early 2014, one of the most talented and beloved editors of the recent magazine era retired from the business after more than thirty years on the job.

Colleagues knew Wayne Lawson as an ever-generous mentor, and an “office raconteur,” with a gleeful, hearty laugh and a penchant for martinis. I was lucky enough to work with him in the 1980s during editor-in-chief Tina Brown’s tenure, and over the years, whenever I saw him again, he remained true to form: altruistic, with boundless intellectual curiosity, hilarious, elegant and never a snob.



George Lepape cover 1919

Wayne was one of the editors hired in 1982 to re-launch *Vanity Fair*, which had been a thriving magazine in the early 20th century but fell victim to the Great Depression. He has an M.F.A from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, and worked as an editor and ghostwriter in New York before working at *The New York Times Book Review* and then *Vanity Fair*. He helped editors-in-chief Tina Brown and Graydon Carter (who will retire in December 2017) steer the wide-ranging general-interest *Vanity Fair* through the glamorous magazine era of the 1980s and 90s, *always* focusing on where story was.

Simon Brennan, who worked with Wayne for over two decades at *Vanity Fair* had this to say about him:

"There has always been this trope that writing is an art and journalism is a craft, but with Wayne he really seemed to meld the two, and he did it with a passion that had no equal. His attention to a writer's voice and intention—and how sometimes a writer's voice was at odds with that intention or vice versa, and how he could remedy that—seemed to me to be unparalleled. There wasn't an editor with a quicker and more elegant solution to a problem. He unerringly made the right decision, and always made the story better. And his touch was, as with all great editors, invisible in

the final product. His ego never got in the way; he always acted in service to the story. His curiosity was (and is still) voracious. He seemed to know everyone and always had great stories to tell about the people he knew and the things that they did. And that is one of the keys about Wayne. He has a great ear for storytelling, whether it's one of his own (and those were either charming or hilarious and quite often both), or a writer's. His love of a good story is profound and, is still, inspiring.”

On his way to the Toronto Film Festival to attend the premier of the film *Scotty and the Secret History of Hollywood*, directed by Matt Tyrnauer, a long-time *Vanity Fair* writer, Wayne kindly answered the following questions for Bookwitty:

**As one of the editors who played a key role in defining the voice of the newly re-launched *Vanity Fair* in 1983, what, for you, were the key elements that needed to be included in the magazine?**

The catch phrase of Richard Locke, *V.F.*'s start-up editor, and his six senior colleagues (I was one) was that this new magazine would be the equal of *The New Yorker*, with great photographs instead of cartoons. Locke had been deputy editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, so his choice of featured writers was clear from the start—Gabriel García Márquez, V. S. Naipaul, Walker Percy. The launch was dimly viewed by critics, however, and after four issues Locke was succeeded by Leo Lerman, the grand old man of Conde Nast, with decades at *Mademoiselle* and *Vogue* behind him. He replaced Locke's dense literary reads with short fiction and glossy stories about society and the performing arts—Calvino, the Kennedys, George Balanchine. Lerman made me the managing editor and lasted through eight issues, during which time he published a pair of memorable articles: a two-part piece on the trial of the Nazi Klaus Barbie, by Francine Duplessix Gray, which won *V.F.* its first ASME Award, for reporting, and Dominick Dunne's account of the trial of his daughter's killer, which Tina Brown, Lerman's successor, had actually commissioned. I edited both stories.

Brown covers her eight-year editorship in [\*The Vanity Fair Diaries\*](#), so I'll just say that she succeeded where her predecessors had failed by injecting a high quotient of spin and irreverence and politics into the mix. She also decided that, since *V.F.* could not compete with *The New Yorker* in quality fiction, she would no longer publish any. She told me that to her, a managing editor meant a super office manager, and that I



was certainly not that; I should work strictly with writers, and she came up with the title executive literary editor. Soon *V.F.* was featuring true crime stories about the rich and famous, and in the 30 years to come I would edit many of those, under Brown and later Graydon Carter: Dominick Dunne on O.J. Simpson and the Menendez brothers, Maureen Orth on Michael Jackson and Andrew Cunanan, Marie Brenner on Richard Jewel and Jeffrey Wigand, and Mark Seal on Tiger Woods and Bernie Madoff.

**If you were to start a literary magazine today, what would these elements be?**

Given the history I've sketched above, it's unlikely I will be starting a literary magazine, particularly since most contemporary poetry leaves me totally cold. These days I read much more nonfiction than fiction. In 1955, *The Hudson Review* printed a play I had written as an undergraduate at Princeton, but since then I have not given much time to literary magazines. My advice for such a publication would be to restrict it to promising writers on a single subject.

**You have edited many extraordinary authors, among whom Gabriel García Márquez. What was that like? Did you work directly with him?**

It was the 30,000-word novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, and I worked with neither García Márquez nor Gregory Rabassa, the translator. All of my suggestions and changes went through the New York publisher. I did, however, later edit a piece by Fernando Botero, the illustrator. And over the years I edited a long list of other famous people, often one-time contributors, including Gloria Vanderbilt, Barbara Walters, Al Gore, William Buckley, Mikhail Baryshnikov, and Tom Ford.

**Are there any anecdotes about working with other authors that you can share?**

My favorite is a story about Dominick Dunne. In January 1994, I was at the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles, working with him on an installment of the Menendez murders. In the early morning hours, a major earthquake shook me awake. When he

and I found each other in the lobby minutes later, we realized that all we had both taken with us from our rooms were the four manuscript pages we had edited that night.

**When you started at *Vanity Fair*, it was the rise of the Brat Pack authors. What literary trends have you seen come and go since then, and where do you see literature going in the US?**

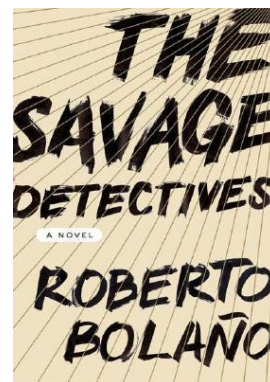
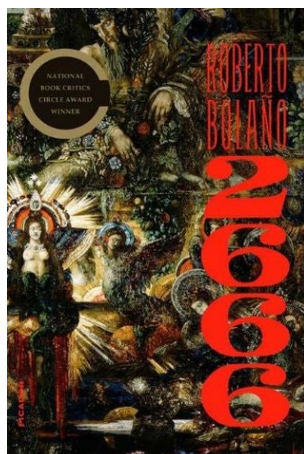
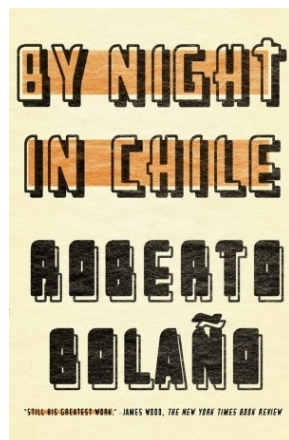
There has been the English trio of Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan, and Martin Amis. It's hard to predict movements here or anywhere. The last great wave came from South America—García Márquez but also Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes.

**Story telling has been a large part of your life, have you considered telling your own stories?**

I was the ghostwriter for Gloria Swanson's 1980 book, *Swanson on Swanson*, and the cast of characters was extraordinary, starting with her. I've always wanted to write about the creation of that book.

**Was there a specific moment when you decided being a literary editor was for you, rather than a career as an author, much like a musician might decide to be a performer rather than a composer, or did it just happen organically?**

I assumed after finishing the Swanson book that I would go on co-writing autobiographies. Instead I wound up working with [Jerzy Kosinski](#) in his apartment for a year. Then I was invited to *The New York Times Book Review* and a year later to *V.F.* In spite of myself, I had become a full-time editor.



**Could you name five novels that deserve more attention than they got, and briefly say why?**

I would cite all the novels of [Roberto Bolaño](#), who for me was the world's greatest storyteller in decades. I feel that a number of other recent books should have a much bigger audience:

[How to Live](#), by Sarah Bakewell (the life and thought of Montaigne)

[The Dark Box](#), by John Cornwell (one of my writers at *V.F.*, on the history of the confessional)

[God's Crucible](#), by David Levering Lewis (the history of the spread of Islam)

[Poems](#) by François Villion, brilliantly translated by David Georgi (a colleague at *V.F.*)

Just this year I have discovered [King Edward III](#), which is now listed among the official complete works of Shakespeare. And in my catching up of books I missed all my life, I top the list with Lord Byron's [Don Juan](#), the wittiest long poem in the English language. I came to it by way of [Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame](#), by Benita Eisler, another of my *V.F.* writers.

**Authors today often have a “platform”, become a “brand” and need to be busy on social media. What are your thoughts about this?**

The only well-earned case that comes to mind is J. K. Rowling and the Harry Potter phenomenon, including her valiant new political role on social media.

**As people read less, and buy fewer books, how do you think young people will get their stories and in what form?**

I suspect they're getting them second-hand, through TV adaptations of books. An example is the forthcoming series about Andrew Cunanan, Gianni Versace's murderer, based on Maureen Orth's superb investigative book on the case, *Vulgar Favors*.

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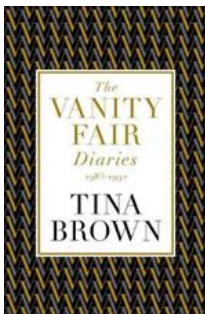
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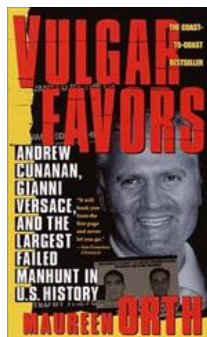


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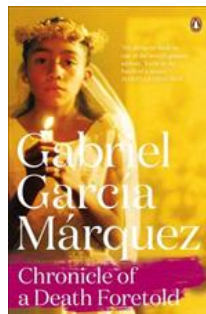
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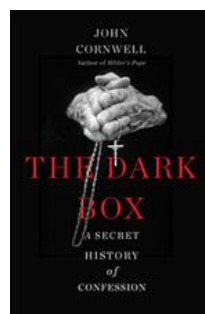
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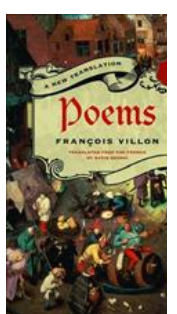
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