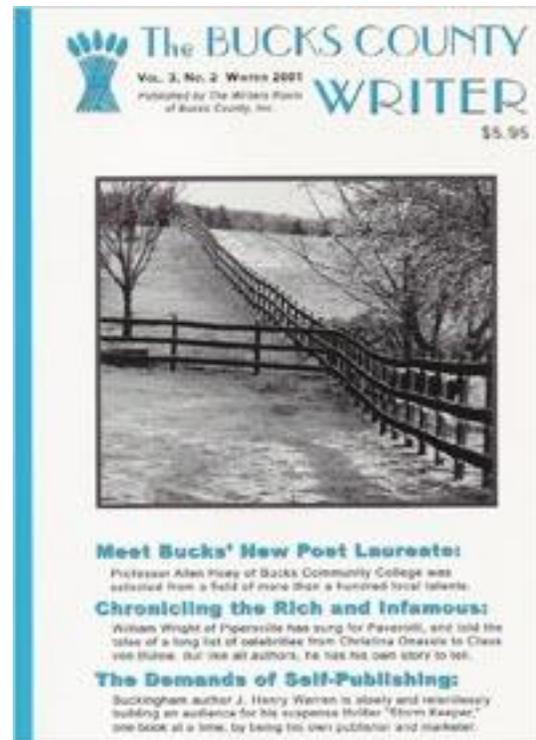


William Wright
The Bucks County Writer
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William Wright is not the first writer who has had an unpublished manuscript tucked away in a drawer waiting for renewed inspiration or the time to rework it. Unlike most writers, however, his unfinished opus had been locked away for nearly 35 years before he resubmitted it to his agent late last year.

“This work may hold the record for longest time between rewrites,” Wright says with a wry smile. Bearded and balding, he is relaxed in khakis and a black sweatshirt. During pauses in the conversation, he gazes out the large, mullioned windows in the sunny living room of his Pipersville home, as if looking back at the person he was when he penned his first draft.



“Some scenes were hard to remember, even when I read them. I guess my memory is spotty. I don’t think my style is all that different now, but I am a different person.

The long hiatus between the initial and most recent drafts of his first book were not wasted. Wright is the author of one novel and ten published works of nonfiction and biography, chronicling the lives of the rich, such as Christina Onassis; the talented, such as Luciano Pavarotti; and the infamous, such as Claus Von Bülow.

Wright’s career began rather auspiciously when, still in his 20s, he landed a job as an editor at Holiday Magazine, one of the premier literary journals of the day, that published such writers as John Steinbeck, Truman Capote, and British author V.S. Pritchett.

Although he had wanted to be a writer, his experience at Holiday initially blunted that ambition because he “loved being an editor.”

“Any dreams of writing I may have had were squelched by my boss who was convinced that one was a writer or an editor, never both,” Wright recalls. “He considered me a first-rate editor.”

Framed photos of well-known people Wright has known, from Pavarotti to Natalie Wood, line the walls of the dark-paneled, bookshelf-lined study that is Wright’s Bucks County office. Leather armchairs flank a large, stone fireplace at one end of the room, and an oversized desk and a computer and other tools of his trade fill the other end.

Sheet music lies scattered atop a grand piano in the adjoining room, as if he has just finished a practice session. A wooden deck runs three quarters of the way around the house, and every room opens onto it. Trailing grape vines cover an arbor that Wright added years ago. "There is no more pleasant place to eat than in sunlight filtered through grape leaves," he says.

Wright also owns homes in New York City and Key West, and for the past eight years or so, he has owned this one in Pipersville. "Maintaining three places is a lot," he admits. But he is clearly inspired here: The property boasts a stone-lined pond with a waterfall that he built himself.

Wright was not a stranger to Bucks County when he bought this home. He was born in the Mt. Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia, and he, his parents, and sister spent idyllic Sundays in New Hope, taking in plays at The Bucks County Playhouse and having dinner. One of Wright's childhood idols, child star, Freddie Bartholomew, who played a character called Little Lord Fauntleroy in Hollywood movies, was still performing at the Playhouse in those days.

"It didn't matter that he was an adult now or that his fame had faded. To me he was a connection with the great world."

Wright graduated from Germantown Friends High School in Philadelphia, studied English and psychology at Yale University, joined the Army during the Korean War, and attended the Army language school in Monterey, California.

For a year, Wright studied Chinese for six hours each day and enjoyed the beach in Carmel in his free time. He later served in Okinawa and on an aircraft carrier in the South Pacific performing classified intelligence work about which he remains mum. After his discharge, Wright moved to New York City where he worked first for an ad agency, then as a writer for the Tex and Jinx NBC radio and TV talk show.

"I did pre-interviews with celebrities, preparing scripts for the all-live, three-hour show, each day." During his brief tenure with Tex and Jinx – the show was cancelled six months after he joined the staff – he interviewed some of the most popular people of the day including Jerry Lewis, Micky Mantle, and Kirk Douglas.

"Then I moved on, writing credentials in hand."

Wright moved to Naples, Italy, where he taught English and learned Italian. He earned only about \$180 a month, but felt his life there was priceless.

"That was low, even by the standards of the day, but you could live quite well on that, and it was a wonderful year," he says.

It was on his return to the States that he joined the staff of Holiday Magazine, where his boss forced him to choose between writing and editing.

“Every writer self-edits,” Wright says, “but you use a different set of mental muscles for each job. As the editor, you’re the reader. You can look at the work at say, ‘Will they get it?’ ‘Is it repetitious?’”

“Holiday was a fine magazine. We took first-rate writers and taught them to be journalists,” he recalls. “It’s hard to take a journalist and turn him into a good writer, but a talented writer can make a piece about orange crates interesting with the right sensibility and eye.”

While at Holiday, Wright was asked to fact-check an article about Gian Carlo Menotti, Italian composer and founder of the recently formed celebration of the arts, the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy. “We had a long phone conversation, and he was delightful. I was stunned when he offered me a job as the festival’s general manager not knowing that I had lived in Italy, spoke Italian and love opera.”

Wright spent a “mad year” running the festival and acting as a buffer between the artists, including dancers from the New York City Ballet and poet Ezra Pound, and the festival’s board of directors, which reneged on its promise to provide funds for it all, including pay for the performers. Wright turned his experience there into his first book. “I submitted it to every publisher around. They thought there wouldn’t be any interest in it, that no one would know or care about the Spoleto festival, and rejected it, but liked my writing style. Two offered me contracts for different books and I’ve been writing ever since.”

Wright’s agent at the time has continued to represent him throughout his long career, and has repeatedly encouraged him to dust off his story about Spoleto and shop it around again. He recently gave in to her entreaties.

Titled “That Summer in Spoleto,” the book had been relegated to storage while he launched his writing career with his first assignment. Wright’s first book, “Ball,” came out in 1972 and was an exposé of the charity ball “racket” in New York City, unveiling the lifestyles of the very rich.

In an attempt to diversify and write for himself, Wright began a novel. Before it was completed, he was assigned to write the life story of Marjorie Merriwether Post, heiress to the General Foods fortune. Post’s was the first of several biographies Wright would pen over the course of his career, peaking with two volumes with the internationally acclaimed Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti.

Wright added to his resume a biography of playwright, author, and cultural icon, Lillian Hellman; another biography, “All the Pain That Money Can Buy,” about Christina Onassis; and “The Von Bülow Affair,” a dissection of the trial of Claus Von Bülow, convicted of attempting to murder his socialite wife, Sunny.

After decades of writing for and about other people, Wright next selected a topic close to his heart. “Born that Way,” his most recent title, examines new information about the

influence of genes over personality and behavior. He describes it as his most challenging and technical, but as a lover of science, genetics, and human behavior, one he had to write.

“When I was at Yale studying psychology, the prevailing belief was that a person could be molded into any sort of person. I didn’t buy into it. Any mother with more than one child will tell you that children arrive with their personalities pretty much set.”

“Born That Way” in part explores the ongoing Minnesota Study of Identical Twins in which 75 sets of twins were separated at birth and raised apart from each other. The study ostensibly proves that upbringing and environment don’t make much difference in a person’s personality.

“The study is fascinating. This subject of genetic influence on our behavior is one of the most interesting for me now,” Wright says.

Wright’s most famous subject is Luciano Pavarotti, who rose to worldwide acclaim from a childhood filled with struggle – the foundation of the first book – to a life as a superstar – that of the second.

“Pavarotti is unusual in that he broke out of his narrow opera niche. Everyone knows him.”

From his days in Spoleto, Wright knew Pavarotti’s manager, who challenged Wright on his credentials to write a biography of the musician.

“He asked how I could write this when I wasn’t a musicologist,” Wright remembers. He persuaded Pavarotti’s manager that the goal was to produce a book which would be widely read, not one that would be of interest to just the handful of musicologists in the world. He got the assignment.

Sixteen years later, when Pavarotti had become a household name, it was Wright who was tapped, personally chosen by the singer, to write the follow-up.

“That was quite an honor, really. He could have gotten any writer in the world at that point.”

Pavarotti was quite an open and generous subject, allowing Wright to travel with him and “hang out.”

“He felt that if he gave access to his life, a book would occur.” But something within Pavarotti made him resist talking about his past, so Wright ended up relying on other sources for that history.

“For Luciano, books are big deals. I began to suspect he felt he was not important enough to have a book written about him.

“Here is where I devised a new format that hadn’t been done at that time,” Wright continues. “I had separate chapters written by other people – his wife, singing teacher, friends – and it worked very well.”

Writer and tenor shared one memorable musical interlude, as Wright recalls. “Luciano was at the piano running through some vocal exercises. He said, - Wright slips into a heavy Italian accent - ‘Beel, I hear something in your voice. Seeng for me.’ I did and I clutched – sounded like Kermit the Frog,” Wright says with a chuckle. “He never asked me to sing again.”

Wright approaches a new book by first reading everything that exists about his topic. For certain subjects, that’s easy.

“Lillian Hellman became famous at 29, and didn’t shut up for 50 years. It was a huge job to read all that was written about her, but you have to do it.” For others, like Marjorie Post, however, there wasn’t much written. After reading whatever is available, he goes to secondary interviews for more information.

While Wright has found himself thrown into the midst of the social elite most of his life, he finds himself, like many writers, alone quite often.

“I work best when I have no social life. I don’t like to have to look at the clock. There’s nothing better than an open-ended evening with no interruptions.”

Each of his homes affords him quality writing time and unique diversions: His home in Key West is one block from the ocean, and he enjoys the company of a large writers’ community and the stimulation of a large, annual literary seminar there.

In Manhattan, Wright attends the theater and opera. In Bucks County, he absorbs the tranquility of the adjacent woods and farmland with its grazing cows.

Wright has earned his share of public acclaim, but remains pragmatic about what that means. He appreciates his good fortune, while lamenting those “good writers who don’t get the recognition they deserve.”

“Many foremost novelists don’t get the veneration they should. There isn’t the adulation and influence writers once had. But is it more important to be famous or to get a message across?”

“A valuable aim of a writer is to communicate to others,” Wright recommends, “not just to be looked up to.”

And so Bill Wright, biographer of the rich and famous, finds himself, like any other writer, waiting for the phone call from his agent that he hopes will mean publication for his latest book – 35 years in the making.

