

Interview mit Lawrence Wright

Wir entnehmen das Interview dem Buch „[The New New Journalism](#)“, in dem der New Yorker Journalismus-Professor [Robert S. Boynton](#) sich mit 19 profilierten amerikanischen Reporter über ihr Arbeit unterhält, von [John Krakauer](#) bis [Susan Orlean](#) - jenen Schreibern also, die dem Aufruf von Tom Wolfe gefolgt sind, einen neuen, erzählenden Journalismus zu begründen.

Das Interview wurde geführt am 3. November 2002 - als Lawrence Wright bereits mitten in der Recherche zu „The Looming Towers“ steckte.

Robert S. Boynton: What kinds of subjects are you drawn to?

Lawrence Wright: I'm interested in why people believe what they believe. America has a huge supermarket of beliefs to choose from. It's liberating, but there's also a terrifically dangerous quality to it. The times when people are led into trouble—via political or religious movements—they're always animated by strong beliefs.

Yet reporters rarely take beliefs seriously. The status of a religion reporter at a newspaper is comparable to that of an obituary writer's. Reporters are skeptics, so the whole idea of belief is a little repugnant to them. When they are confronted with someone who is genuinely captivated by belief, reporters take pity on them by not writing about their beliefs.

RSB: How do you develop your general interest in belief into a story idea?

LW: I often stumble onto them. At the outset, my stories may not seem to be about belief. But once I get going, that is the angle I tend to pursue.

For example, in 1991 my therapist told me about the plague of multiple personality disorders (MPD). Both he and his wife, who is also a therapist, were treating a number of young women with MPD. And when they started probing it, they almost always uncovered memories of satanic abuse in the woman's childhood. The scale of what he described was astounding. He said that Satanists in Austin, Texas, alone were responsible for 50 murders a year—a figure that actually exceeded Austin's total murder rate! I thought, "What's going on here?"

RSB: That's fascinating information, but how did you develop it into a story?

LW: I started reporting. I attended a workshop at which a policeman claimed that Satanists were responsible for 50,000 murders a year in the US—a figure which exceeded the entire national murder rate. And this guy was a well-respected cop!

That's when I knew there was a story there: a story about believers and those who believed them. I went to Tina Brown, then editor of The New Yorker, and told her I wanted to write

about MPD. She wasn't that interested until I told her that most people with MPD claimed to have been victims of satanic abuse. That got her excited.

RSB: Ok, you've got a story idea and an assignment. How do you go about finding a particular story, such as the one that became Remember Satan?

LW: I wanted a story that would encompass both the satanic abuse and MPD. So I did a Nexis search and found over 1,000 reported cases nationally. I read the articles and started calling the lawyers, victims, or other people who were involved.

The only case in which someone had actually been tried and convicted was Paul Ingram's. He was a fundamentalist Christian and the deputy sheriff of a small town in Washington State, and had confessed to committing these crimes. I figured that if there was ever a test case to see whether Satanic ritual abuse existed, this was it.

RSB: Is this instance typical of the way you find stories?

LW: Not necessarily. I also keep large files full of clippings on stories I'd one day like to write. For instance, this morning's Times has a story about an Israeli boy who was killed in a suicide bombing whose parents donated his kidneys to a seven year-old Palestinian girl. This isn't the first time something like this has happened. I got interested in this kidney story when I was in Cairo and Jerusalem on a USIA tour in 1997. I was debating an Israeli Arab, who is now a member of the Knesset, who later had a kidney replaced and is now promoting an organ bank for this kind of exchange.

RSB: Why are you interested in a story about kidney transplants?

LW: Again, it's a story about belief. Both communities—orthodox Jews and Muslims—frown upon organ transplants because they're not religiously sanctified. But if your daughter is dying of kidney failure, you make a choice between your religious beliefs and your love for your child. It is an existential crisis. I'd like to write about this because this is a transgression of faith, and it's also one way "enemy" peoples are struggling towards peace. The ideal would be to follow one Israeli kidney and one Muslim kidney.

RSB: When deciding whether to pursue a story, what elements do you look for?

LW: I like stories that are keyholes into a huge room. At first my stories often seem very small and confined. But when you put your eye down and look through it, it is a tiny window on an enormous universe.

RSB: A lot of your stories take place in the Middle East. Are you more drawn to stories in certain parts of the world than others?

LW: I was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam war and my alternative service was teaching at American University in Cairo. I formed deep ties in Egypt and, given my interest in faith and belief, I've remained intrigued by that part of the world. After all, it is the homeland of religious extremism of all kinds.

RSB: Do you report international stories differently from the way you report domestic ones?

LW: I try not to. Writers are often misled by the exoticness of foreign places. Their perceptions are distorted by it. As a result, they don't consider the people they meet there as truly human in an everyday sense they would ascribe to people "back home." So when I'm reporting an international story I do my best to strip away the exotic veneer of the place in order to write about my characters in a fashion that is recognizable in any context. Then, once I've established their everyday humanity, I can get at the truly exotic dimension of the story.

RSB: But don't you run the risk of diminishing the genuine "foreign-ness" of these characters?

LW: There is a real tension. On the one hand we over-estimate the exoticness of a foreign culture. On the other hand, we fail to grasp the profound differences between cultures—differences which are sometimes so alienating that two people from different cultures can't really see each other at first. So I try to strip away those superficial differences, the obvious cultural things, and render the character recognizable, human, and sympathetic in his own terms. Once I've done that I can explore the kinds of differences that are unique to him.

For instance, I wrote a novel about Manuel Noriega (*God's Favorite*, S&S 2000) and his search for love and salvation. What drew me to him was the fact that he was a Buddhist, vegetarian, bisexual, Central American dictator. But before I could get to those topics, I had to demystify his Central American-ness, because Americans are reluctant to read about Latin Americans. Noriega's cultural exoticness was only window dressing. It was his interior life that was truly exotic.

RSB: What kinds of people do you least like writing about?

LW: I've never been drawn to celebrities. The phenomenon of celebrity is over-explored and less interesting than much else in life. But if there's something beyond someone's celebrity that's intriguing, I have no objection to writing about him.

RSB: How many projects do you juggle at a time?

LW: I prefer writing one thing at a time, although I'll occasionally divide my day between two projects. One might be an article, while the other might be a screenplay or a book. I'm fortunate at the moment because I'm working on a screenplay about John O'Neill, whom I wrote about in the magazine ("The Counter-Terrorist," *New Yorker*, Jan 14, 2002). At the same time, I'm writing a book about the events that led to the tragedy of September 11th. What I learn from writing the screenplay will enrich the book, and vice-versa.

RSB: You write articles, screenplays and novels. How do you decide through which genre to pursue a story?

LW: Usually when an idea comes to me it is already in a particular form. It is pretty intuitive, although I got the Noriega idea completely wrong. It started out as a two-man play, a dialogue between Noriega and the Papal nuncio who gave him asylum when the US invaded Panama. It seemed perfect in Greek dramatic terms: The wickedest man in the world talking with the Pope's official representative—all this while the American army blasted rock music outside. But the play didn't work. I couldn't get the nuncio to shut up, and I couldn't get Noriega to say a word!

So I decided to write a screenplay about it. I had a blast and the screenplay just roared out of me. Oliver Stone was going to make it. He cast Al Pacino as Noriega and Jennifer Lopez as his girlfriend. Then the whole thing fell apart, as movies so often do. So I wrote it as a novel. The experience taught me that my intuition isn't infallible. (The movie was eventually made for Showtime, starring Bob Hoskins.)

RSB: Let's talk about research. Some writers say that they don't want to start a story knowing too much for fear that all this information it will dull their own impressions. Do you?

LW: I've never understood that philosophy. What are you adding to the world of knowledge if you simply give the reader your impressions? They are bound to be superficial. They might be brilliant and insightful if you are a brilliant and insightful person. But I believe they'd be even more brilliant and insightful if you really worked at understanding your subject by doing a lot of research.

RSB: Do you have a consistent research routine?

LW: Yes, I have one I swear by. The first thing I do is a Nexis search and read everything I can on the subject. As I read, I make a list of the people in the clips I'd like to talk to.

For instance, here is the list I made for the John O'Neill story. [Wright takes out a worn, yellow legal pad, thick with line after line of names, telephone numbers, email addresses, and brief identifying comments.] These are the names of the people at his funeral, here are his colleagues, his girlfriend, his ex-wife. The contact information will eventually become very important to the fact-checkers. As the list grows, I highlight the names of those I've gotten hold of.

At the end of each interview I always ask whom else should I speak to. Or ask for help with contacting other people I know about, but don't have numbers for. I'm mapping the universe of those who knew the person I'm writing about.

RSB: How long are these lists?

LW: They can be anywhere from 15-20 single-spaced pages with hundreds of names on it.

RSB: What other kinds of research do you do?

LW: I read a lot of books. Here are the book's I'm using for my 9/11 project [Wright gestures to three six-foot-long shelves of books]. As I read them I highlight certain passages. Then I have an assistant write down each quote on an index card, and note where it came from.

RSB: Ok, now that you've got an idea, an assignment, and have done some research, how do you start the interview process?

LW: I usually start by asking someone how he knew the person I'm writing about. The goal of my first interview is to establish a relationship, not squeeze anything out of him. I don't want to scare him off.

RSB: How much time do you like to spend with the people you interview?

LW: When I find a really good source—somebody who is close to the subject, and is both authoritative and interesting—I'll interview him dozens of times. Although I don't expect instant information, I want to establish a few things immediately. I want my source to know that I am going to write this article, I want it to be right and, since he is the authority, I need his help.

RSB: How do you get people to cooperate and give you such enormous access?

LW: I let them know that I've spent a tremendous amount of time preparing and that I take this subject extremely seriously. People are naturally interested in talking about themselves and their pursuits, and if you can convince them of the genuineness of your interest, it's a rare person that doesn't want to satisfy your curiosity.

I don't want to overwhelm them, but it is helpful to tell them straight away about the kind of commitment I'll need from them. I say, "There are a lot of things I don't know yet, and I'd like to talk to you about this topic. You're an authority and I hope you won't mind if I come back in the future with more specific, informed questions. In fact, I'd like to have a series of long interviews over a period of time. Then, when I'm writing the piece, I will be back in touch to ask you some very short, pointed questions. And finally, a fact-checker will call you to make sure I haven't made any egregious errors, and I hope you'll extend the same courtesy to them.

RSB: Do your interview subjects ever balk at the amount of time you request?

LW: Sure, sometimes they get a little fed up. Talking to me is a little like going to a doctor. I've imposed a regimen on them and I know what's best for the story. But they may not want to go to the doctor every day of the week. I can tell by their voice when they're getting tired, and I give them a few days off. I try not to be frivolous with their time.

RSB: Once you've secured an interview, how do you get people to open up to you?

LW: One way I get them to talk is to show them the lengthy list of all the other people I've talked to. Even hardened FBI agents get wide-eyed when they see how many names are there. They think, "Shit, he's talked to everybody!" It softens them up a little. First because they respect me for the effort I've made. And, second, they feel it's pointless to hide anything from me because somebody else is going to tell me anyway. It's a visual aide that lets people know I'm on the case, and that I'm not likely to be shaken off it.

RSB: Do you prefer approaching someone you want to interview directly, or via a mutual acquaintance?

LW: It's not always necessary to go through someone, but in the claustrophobic world I've been working in recently—Islamists and FBI agents—an introduction really helps. Having an intermediary speak on your behalf is key in the Arab world.

For instance, the first time I met al-Zawahiri's uncle Mahfouz Azzam, he was cold, dismissive, and even a little angry. I really needed his help on the story, so his reluctance to talk openly with me was a problem. In the meantime, I interviewed and established a good rapport with someone who turned out to be a friend of his. I told my new source that I felt bad because I had not made a good impression on the uncle, and this man offered to give him a call. Well, the next time I interviewed the uncle it was as if the gates of paradise had opened. He was welcoming and expansive.

RSB: How much do you reveal about yourself during an interview?

LW: I always tell people what I'm working on. I don't like being the kind of reporter that curries favor with his subjects by inflating his own importance, although I will do it if it's useful. My goal is to be a receptive vessel into which they can pour their stories, and that's more likely to happen if I focus my attention entirely on them, rather than the other way round.

RSB: Where do you most and least like conducting interviews?

LW: I like to see people where they work and live. It relaxes them because they feel they're masters of the situation. They don't feel defensive.

I don't like conducting interviews over dinner. It's awkward to eat while I'm writing and taping, and there are plates and glasses clanking. I don't like being exposed, with people gawking at us from other tables. But sometimes going out and getting somebody drunk is an absolute necessity.

RSB: Do you drink during these interviews as well?

LW: Unfortunately, I do. I am I no way a match for these FBI guys! But it does facilitate the flow of information, and it's a bonding experience.

RSB: Do you ever arrange scenes?

LW: If it's productive, I'll do it. My main goal is to get the information. Sometimes you can get information outside of a person's office that you can't get when you're sitting there.

When I was reporting Remembering Satan, there was fellow named Jim Rabie who had been accused of taking part in these absolutely bizarre rituals and child sacrifices as a member of a Satanic ring. It had ruined his life. The community hated him, he'd been in jail for 6 months, he'd lost his job. He was desperate to prove his innocence and offered to take a lie detector test. And he failed it.

I don't put a lot of weight on lie detector tests, but I figured that from the readers' point of view, Brady's failing the test would be a haunting question that I wouldn't be able to explain away. I realized I would have to give him another lie detector test and then live with the result. I arranged for the best polygraph person I could find to administer a new test. And he passed it this time. I had an obligation on behalf of the reader. As it turned out, the scene where he fails the test became a nice little dramatic point in the story, since it creates tension in the mind of the reader, who wants to believe that Rabie is innocent. Later, I was able to relieve that tension by having Rabie take the second test. Because the whole event was outside of the usual role of the reporter, I explained exactly what I did in an "author's note."

RSB: Do you ever send questions ahead?

LW: Occasionally. The last time I did was when I interviewed the president of the Mormon Church. His office insisted, but it was just a PR department gambit to pressure me. They didn't even look at them.

RSB: Do you ever do interviews by phone, mail or email? Or only in person?

LW: I do a lot of my corresponding with sources via email. It is an easy way to fire off queries to factual questions. Then I'll print out the email correspondence and put them in the files I was just showing you. But I do major interviews face-to-face.

RSB: Do you tape your interviews or take notes?

LW: Both. My note-taking skills aren't great. My handwritten notes are only an approximation of the interview.

RSB: Do you take notes in front of the people you're interviewing?

LW: I prefer to, but I can't always. Sometimes people get intimidated. Recently my main sources have been Islamic fundamentalists and FBI agents—neither of whom are the easiest people to talk to. They are nervous about being identified and slow to trust outsiders. But the next time we meet, they are usually more relaxed about note-taking and tape recorders.

RSB: Do you use short-hand?

LW: No, just sloppy quick notes. I can read my writing, but the fact-checkers often can't, which is another reason I tape. The fact-checkers, whom I love, spend hours and hours listening to my tapes. It's like having the KGB looking over your shoulder, but it can be very helpful.

RSB: Do you ask permission before you tape an interview?

LW: Yes. Sometimes they simply blanch and tell me to put it away. Then I explain that I'm not a great note-taker, and that taping helps ensure accuracy. I explain that it is as much for their protection as it is for my convenience. However reluctant they are at first, once they've agreed to allow me to tape, they usually forget about the recorder's presence after five minutes.

RSB: Will you negotiate about what quotes and information can and can't be used?

LW: Once in awhile someone will ask me to turn off the tape in order to tell me something they don't want to be held responsible for. I'll do it and then write "NFA" (not for attribution) in my notes so I'll know it is "off the record." We then go back "on the record." I don't like doing that. I much prefer an interview to be entirely "on the record."

RSB: Do you allow your subjects to vet their quotes?

LW: Because the New Yorker fact-checkers are going to go over the substance of their quotes with them anyway, I don't mind telling people what I'm going to say about them. I don't particularly like reading exact quotes back to a subject, but I sometimes do it in order to get more information out of him.

For instance, when I was working on a piece about Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri ("The Man Behind Bin Laden," New Yorker, Sep 16, 2002), I would send small passages of the article-in-progress to members of his family whom I had interviewed in Cairo and some who wouldn't talk to me. I'd simply ask whether I was accurate. Even if it made them mad, which

it did on a couple of occasions, I'd open them up and get more information out of them. My main interest is getting it right, so I'm happy to make changes if something is incorrect.

RSB: Do you transcribe the tapes?

LW: If they're key interviews, I have the tapes transcribed by someone else. I used to do it myself, but they have become too voluminous. I've found these special plastic cases that hold four cassettes at a time. They are hard to find, but they enable me to line them up like you'd do with CDs, and keep an index of the interviews they hold on the spine of the case. It is much neater than having hundreds of loose cassettes in a box, the way I used to.

RSB: But if you both take notes and tape, and make reading notes on note cards, how do you keep track of all your different sources of information?

LW: On the left-hand column of the front page of every legal pad I take interview notes on, I create a rough index of whose interviews are located on that pad. I then have an assistant make colored tabs with the names of each person on them. I stick them on the side of the pages where their interviews occur so that I can find them readily. When you put the tablets on their sides, leaning against each other, it looks like a neat file.

Then on each tape I make a notation to tell me where I can find the corresponding interview notes. For instance, this interview with Azzam Tamimi is marked "23i," which means that it is the first tape on the 23rd legal pad. And if I have more than one interview with Azzam Tamimi on the same legal pad, I would mark it "23ai," "23bi," and so on.

RSB: How do you know when you've interviewed enough people?

LW: When I realize I'm not learning anything new. When I know more than the people I'm interviewing. When they start interviewing me about the story—when I'm perceived as the "expert"—I know I've talked to enough people.

RSB: Ok, once you've come up with an idea, developed it into a story, done research, decided whom to interview and conducted the interviews, how do you organize this vast cache of material?

LW: I take the notes from my research and create card files on each character, as well as sub-files on specific topics in his life. Eventually, if a character's file gets as big as, say, Osama bin Laden's here [the box is about three feet deep], it gets a box of its own. An individual file might contain 1200 cards, but they are broken down into manageable divisions.

I have files on Bush and Clinton under my "America" file. There's a general file on "Islam." I have the terrorists and hijackers filed alphabetically, starting with "Mohammed Atta." Then a big file on "al Qaeda," and sub-files on its presence in Algeria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, and so on.

Then, I go back through my interview notes and highlight the things that are the most important. I take the highlighted information and transfer it to the note cards as well. These note cards then become the final resource I consult while writing. When I've gone through all of it, when I've gone through my notes and so, when I'm writing about al-Zawahiri and his family, for instance, it's all right here – in a subsection under Zawahiri in my card file. And the other thing about making note cards like this is that as I'm reading and interviewing,

finding out things, I am intuitively creating categories for the files. Okay, these categories are to some extent arbitrary, but you have to have something, you know – family, marriage, beliefs, those kinds of things – and those categories form an outline. Eventually, those are the things I'm going to write about, because those are the things I was interested in and found out about. It seems a more organic way of developing the information than beginning with an outline and trying to impose that structure on the material.

Another organizational tool I've developed for this 9/11 project is a color-coded, month-by-month, timeline. It starts in 1992 because a lot of the things that culminated in 9/11 started then.

RSB: Why colors?

LW: Because it is easier for my eye to follow a single thread of narrative. I've got Mohammed Atta in purple, the other hijackers in red, al-Zawahiri in blue, John O'Neill in green. Then I have the source (whether an interview or a publication) of the information listed next to the color.

For instance, what if I want to know where al-Zawahiri was in 1999 I just look for the blue marker, and when I find it I consult the source of the information to see how credible it is. If the information comes from the Wall Street Journal, I know it's a fairly reliable public source. If it comes from the internet, it's difficult to know whether it's true or not.

RSB: Given the sophisticated computer software at your disposal, why do all of this organization on paper?

LW: I know I should have gotten to that point by now, but I just find that, in the end, I need everything on paper. People reading this will think I'm insane to put so much labor into organizing the material. But because I do, the actual writing goes very quickly. Everything's right at hand. I developed this method because I used to remember facts, but not where I'd learned them. That was a problem when I had to document the sources.

RSB: How long have you used this method?

LW: I started using it for my book about growing up in Dallas (In the New World: Growing Up with America, 1960 – 1984, Knopf, 1988). It is, essentially a history of this 20-year period in America, and I drew on a lot of different material. My faith in the method increased when I was writing profiles of various religious leaders for Saints & Sinners (Knopf, 1993).

For instance, it helped me when I wrote about Madelyn Murray O'Hare. In my interviews with her and my research, I discovered that over the years she had claimed to have earned 26 different graduate degrees—in law, nursing, social work, etc.—from various institutions. I called each institution she mentioned and discovered that she didn't have any advanced degrees. My note card system was like a finely spun net I could pull through a mass of material. Then, when I hauled it on board, I had all those fish: Iron-clad proof that she had misrepresented herself for decades. She later sued me for \$18 million, and I was real happy I had done my research so thoroughly.

RSB: Ok, you're done with your research, interviewing and organizing. How do you start writing?

LW: I make a rough, 2-3 page outline and tack it up on the wall over my desk. As I said, the headings and sub-headings of my note card files usually determine what goes into the outline. In the case of the al-Zawahiri piece the outline is roughly chronological. I start with the lead, and then move on to “The gospel graph.”

RSB: What’s a “gospel graph”?

LW: It is the graph that tells the reader why he is reading the story. At some magazines it is called the “nut graph.”

RSB: Does the outline become more detailed as you write?

LW: Yes, because the reporting doesn’t stop once the writing begins. In the past, one of my major mistakes was starting to write too soon. I didn’t really know what I was trying to say, and had to stop, go back to my sources, and fill in the gaps. So even when I’m officially “writing,” my day is probably divided evenly between writing and doing additional interviewing.

RSB: Do you try to write a piece from start to finish? Or do you write isolated sections?

LW: I start at the beginning and try to go straight through to the end.

RSB: So you write section after section, day after day, until you finish the project?

LW: No, I go back over what I’ve written. Almost everything can be improved the next day. Sometimes, when I get to those sections that seem like boilerplate, I’ll deliberately write poorly and quickly, just to force myself to make progress. Then I clean it up later.

At the end of each day I stop a little before I’m spent, just so I leave myself something easy to write first thing the next morning. If I don’t know what I’m going to say tomorrow I don’t stop. There’s nothing more confounding than confronting a knotted-up problem first thing in the morning.

RSB: What do you do if you get knotted-up during the day?

LW: I sometimes go for a run because I find it mentally liberating. Oftentimes I’ll solve the problem that is frustrating me after only 500 yards. I get so many ideas when I run that I bring along notepaper and a pencil.

RSB: Do you spend a lot of time thinking about the structure of your pieces?

LW: I tend to tell my stories in a linear, although not always chronological, fashion. When I’m putting a character on the stage, I make sure to spend some time fleshing him out, establishing him as a vivid presence in the reader’s mind. I like to advance a character to a certain point and then, at a moment of decision, I put him on hold. The tension this creates is pleasurable for the readers. And that pause allows me to double back and march the readers through all this essential information—information that might kill their interest if you started with it. But since they know you’ve got something good waiting for them down the road—the character’s moment of decision—they’ll dutifully read this stuff. Then you can resume the delicious business of bringing the character back to life and having him confront the situation.

RSB: Do you need to be in any particular place when you write?

LW: Yes, I'm picky. I'm not one of those guys who can write in a coffee shop with people chatting all around him. Back in Texas, I have a nice office that's dark and quiet. I'm a birder and the only thing that distracts are the birds in the trees outside the office window. I keep a pair of binoculars and always jump up and look at a magnolia warbler.

RSB: What does a perfect writing day look like?

LW: I start my day with a cup of coffee and the newspaper. One of the reasons I like to write at home is that I want to start in a place that's real quiet and calm. When I'm working in the New Yorker offices I have to wait for the subway, jostle with people on the street. Things might happen along the way, and I don't want to see anything that's unsettling. I just want to begin as quietly as possible. I tend not to be very productive in the morning, so I get my e-mail interviewing out of the way in the morning. I don't start clicking until the afternoon, when I'm the most productive. Although my day lasts from 9 to 6, most of the words are produced in the last 2 or 3 hours.

RSB: How many drafts do you typically go through?

LW: After I'm "done" with a piece I like to do a completely new second draft. But when I finish a draft it has a kind of rigidity to it, a fixed rigor mortis. I need someone to come along with a sledgehammer and say, "This doesn't work. This belongs here. Your ending is obscure," etc. I'm grateful for these criticisms because I'm not able to loosen it up by myself. But when I get that criticism, everything loosens up and is moveable again, like an ice flow after a ship goes through it. That's when I like to rewrite the whole thing entirely.

RSB: Are there certain people you show your work-in-progress to?

LW: I have a very dear friend in Texas named Stephen Harrigan, who also writes novels, screenplays and magazine articles. We sometimes talk several times a day, whether it is to run a word by the other, or read a sentence, or set a scene.

RSB: How did you learn to be a reporter?

LW: When I got back from Cairo in 1971, I got a job at the Race Relations Reporter in Nashville, Tennessee. I had no formal training and I'm a little embarrassed by my early stories. They were smart-ass and partisan; the kind of impressionistic journalism I was alluding to a moment ago.

The editor was this very difficult guy named Jim Leeson, who taught me about the value of going deep into a story. I learned that if you are writing about conflict-ridden subjects, like race, it was important to be a calm center that people from both sides could vent to. I learned that a useful role for a reporter is just to be there and hear what people had to say.

RSB: How would you describe your reportorial persona?

LW: I think of a reporter as a professional witness. His job is to report on conflict, and then to return to his community to tell them what is happening and what the community ought to do about it. But the default position for the reporter is usually impartial neutrality—at least for me.

RSB: There's an incredible moment in your profile of Walker Railey, the Methodist minister in Dallas who is suspected of killing his wife. You tell him, "I think you're guilty... Confess or it will haunt you forever, it will drive you crazy." That doesn't sound very impartial or neutral to me.

LW: I just couldn't maintain a dispassionate stance with him. But I don't think a reporter should allow his humanity to be compromised. If you're in a situation that's fundamentally wrong you have to make a stand. Sure you're a "witness," but you're also a representative of your community. You represent what the community wants to know, which means you sometimes have to abandon neutrality in order to elicit the response your reader is waiting to hear. In the case of Walter Railey, most people in Dallas knew, or believed, that he was guilty. By challenging him directly, I gave him an opportunity to respond to the question everyone wanted to ask.

RSB: Other than in your memoir, you rarely appear in your books. Why?

LW: My first editor, Jim Leeson, pounded an ironclad rule into me: The reporter has no place being in his story. So when I wrote my autobiography, it was very charged for me to actually cross the line and enter the universe of "I," "me," and "mine." Plus, nobody had ever thought Dallas worth chronicling in a memoir. I never felt like I had the literary authority of someone growing up in Paris or even Brooklyn. Important and interesting people had passed through those places, but Dallas wasn't a place you could "come from," in a literary sense. I had a great deal of trouble granting myself the permission to write a memoir. But once I started it was incredibly energizing.

When I'm writing straight journalism, however, I don't put myself into the narrative unless there's a damn good reason. I want to enhance the reader's appreciation of the subject, and if being there helps accomplish that—or is impossible to avoid—then I'll do it.

For instance, in the piece about al-Zawahiri I have a scene in which I take a tour of the Cairo prison in which al-Zawahiri, and my guide, were once held. In that scene my guide has to be talking to someone, he has to be pointing things out to someone. I put myself in it because it would be phony to try to hide myself.

According to New Yorker style, they prefer us to write, "he told me," rather than, "he said." The editors believe it makes the piece more authoritative. This drives me nuts because it feels like a mirror in front of the reporter's face. To stand in front of the reader and say, "Look at me. I'm going to show you this. I'm going to take you by the hand"—that's insulting and it rarely leads the reader to trust the writer more than he would otherwise.

RSB: How do you conceive of your authorial presence?

LW: For me the authorial presence is in my voice. That's how the reader knows me. When you're reading the work of a writer you admire and you're wondering what it is that's holding your attention, it's usually the author's comforting and confidential voice inside your head.

RSB: Describe your writing voice.

LW: I try to be companionable and firm. Sure, friendly, honest.

RSB: What writers have influenced your choice of voice?

LW: I'm a big fan of John McPhee. He was very influential in drawing my attention to journalism as a literary calling. I adore A.J. Leibling. He is a good example of someone who really used his voice, which is so exuberant and playful. I wanted so much to write like him. In terms of pure style, Robert Penn Warren was a big influence. And he's interested in very similar subjects—power, spirituality and belief. He's drawn to human darkness, and I am too.

RSB: Do you think a lot about the sound of words as you write?

LW: Yes, I'm obsessive about grooming the sound of my prose. I like it when editors help me, when they say, "I notice you're doing a lot of word repetition here." I melt with gratitude. I spend a lot of time polishing.

RSB: Do you think about language differently, depending whether you are writing nonfiction, fiction or a screenplay?

LW: One of the reasons I wanted to write a novel is that there are certain limitations on how far you can go with the prose when writing nonfiction, how far you can go into the character's mind.

RSB: Do you believe that journalism can lead to truth?

LW: Truth is one of those subjective terms that are pointless to get too tied up about. "Truth" has this absolute quality and yet everybody hangs onto his own truth. A better word might be "understanding." The whole point of a reporter is to sympathize with different perspectives. but I don't think sympathy leads to truth.

For instance, in the recovered memory debate, there was more truth on the side of those who said, "This is an hysterical outbreak" than on the side of those who said, "No, these people are suffering from real memories and experiences." I felt obligated to report on what I believed, while trying to understand both camps.

Another example is the 9/11 book I'm working on. 3,000 people dead and two civilizations are locked in a violent conflict. Virtually everybody claims to have access to "the truth," and a number of them are even willing to die for it. I can't presume to say that my truth is any truer than their truth. But I do have a stance, and I do think that as a journalist I can help the reader understand the conflicting beliefs.

The problem I have with the word truth is that it sounds very simple. And when things get simple, they get dangerous—they don't get easier. We're sliding towards an era of radical simplicity: good vs. evil, us vs. them, etc. The reporter's job in such a situation is to complicate the issue because complexity leads more to understanding whereas simplicity creates stereotypes.

RSB: Do you consider yourself a "New Journalist," along the lines that Tom Wolfe described in his essay of that name?

LW: Wolfe had a big influence on me. I have always loved his writing and he showed me how journalism could take real stories, real people, and put them together in a literary manner. While I wouldn't say that I practice precisely the same kind of journalism Wolfe does, I've

certainly been informed by it, especially in my screenplays. One of the most important things Wolfe put on the table was the importance of social rank.

RSB: What do you call the kind of journalism you practice?

LW: I don't label it. But if you're asking what I add to the tradition of the "new journalism" I'd say it is attention to the interior life. Wolfe is concerned with where people stand in society. I'm more engaged with the subterranean, sometimes deeply dangerous urges, and how these beliefs steer individuals and cultures into conflict.