

## The newsman who witnessed JFK's death

**Tom Wicker**  
1926–2011

Tom Wicker became a famous journalist the day President Kennedy



was assassinated. As a reporter for *The New York Times*, he was in the presidential motorcade on Nov. 22, 1963, when the shots rang out at Dallas's Dealey Plaza. Amid the chaos after the shooting, Wicker frantically scribbled notes, ran half a mile carrying his typewriter and briefcase, and dictated a 106-paragraph story in a series of phone calls. The shooting, he later wrote, "marked the beginning of the end of innocence."

Born and raised in North Carolina as the son of a railroad conductor, Wicker served in the Navy before studying journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He started a career as a novelist, said the Associated Press, but when his "early books didn't catch fire," he began writing for local newspapers. His drive and talent landed him a job with the *Times* in 1960 as a political correspondent in the Washington bureau.

Wicker quickly gained a reputation as the bureau's "workhorse," said the *Times*, and was soon named White House correspondent—the

role that took him to Dallas on that fateful November day. His dispatch capturing the "searing images" of Kennedy's assassination vaulted Wicker "to journalistic prominence overnight," and he quickly became Washington bureau chief and one of the paper's star columnists.

As a columnist, Wicker was a "liberal voice of the *Times*," said *The Washington Post*. He

denounced Lyndon B. Johnson for intervening in Vietnam, and his condemnation of Richard Nixon's tactics in the Watergate scandal put him on the president's "enemies list." In 1971, Wicker became so involved in a hostage situation at Attica prison in New York that the prisoners invited him to "help mediate talks" with prison officials. After the rebellion turned into a bloodbath, he was widely criticized for "becoming a participant in a story he was covering."

Wicker's 1975 book about his experience at Attica, *A Time to Die*, "was hailed as his best," said the Wilmington, N.C., *Star-News*. He wrote 20 nonfiction and fiction books, including *Unto This Hour*, a "Russian-sized" novel about a key Civil War battle.

## The director who loved to shock

**Ken Russell**  
1927–2011

Ken Russell delighted in testing the limits of good taste. The



British film director regaled audiences with images of naked women cavorting in railway carriages and nuns indulging in orgies. Some critics dismissed his movies as pornographic and sensationalist, dubbing the director "the apostle of excess." Russell shrugged off such attacks. "Whoever heard of a work of art being restrained?" he said.

Born in the English port city of Southampton to a father who owned a shoe store, Russell developed an early love of movies. His father "was given to outbursts of rage," said *BBC.com*, so Russell would often take refuge with his mother in local cinemas. After briefly serving in the merchant navy, Russell moved to London to work as a freelance photographer and filmmaker. In 1959 he took a job at the BBC, where he made a series of stylish documentaries on classical composers, said the London *Telegraph*. Buoyed by the success and notoriety of these films—his profile of Richard Strauss displayed the composer in a Nazi uniform—Russell pro-

gressed to the cinema. His first commercial success came with his 1969 adaptation of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, which picked up five Oscar nominations and boasted a nude wrestling scene between Alan Bates and Oliver Reed.

He went on to test more taboos. Russell described his 1970 biopic of the composer Tchaikovsky, *The Music Lovers*, as a study of "a homosexual who marries a nymphomaniac." The following year saw the release of *The Devils*, a tale of religious fanaticism at a 17th-century French convent, which was "Russell's most brilliant and audaciously cinematic work," said the London *Guardian*. But Warner Bros. cut the movie, as it "didn't like such things as nuns masturbating at representations of Christ on the cross."

By the mid-1980s, Russell found himself marginalized by the cinematic establishment. But even with a career in eclipse, he kept busy, directing films and documentaries for British TV, including an explicit adaptation of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. To the end, he refused to compromise. "Reality is a dirty word for me," he said. "There's too much of it about."

## Stalin's peripatetic daughter

As a girl growing up in Moscow, Lana Peters had her famous father in the palm of her hand. Joseph Stalin sowed terror during the day,

**Lana Peters**  
1926–2011

but when he came home in the evenings he would smother

his only daughter with what she later called "overflowing Georgian affection."

Yet the childhood of Svetlana Stalina, as she was then known, was "punctuated by unexplained disappearances," said the London *Telegraph*. She was 6 when her mother died, allegedly of appendicitis; only a decade later did she learn that it was actually a suicide. Her father later dispatched Svetlana's first lover to a Siberian prison camp, and refused to ever meet her first husband, with whom she had a son. Stalin encouraged a subsequent marriage, which resulted in a daughter but soon ended in divorce.

After Stalin's death, in 1953, his daughter "lost many of her privileges" in the Soviet Union, said *The New York Times*, and eventually sought a way out. She fell in love with a visiting Indian communist, who died in Moscow in 1967. She arranged to carry his ashes to India, where she requested political asylum at the U.S. Embassy. As "the most high-profile Soviet exile since the ballet virtuoso Rudolf Nureyev," Svetlana earned millions writing two memoirs and became "a weapon in the Cold War." She was briefly married to architect William Wesley Peters, shortened her name to Lana, and had another daughter, but happiness eluded her. She soon embarked on an "odd, formless odyssey"—to England, to the USSR, and finally, in 1986, back to the U.S. She died, impoverished, in rural Wisconsin. "You cannot regret your fate," she once said. "Although I do regret that my mother didn't marry a carpenter."