

‘The more quirky and eccentric the person, the better’: How Annalyn Swan fell in love with biographical writing



by **Molly Minta**
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Annalyn Swan entered the Zoom chat wearing a round straw hat and a blue-and-white patterned shirt. A packed, white bookcase lined the room behind her in her New York City home. It was 5 p.m., and the acclaimed biographer and native Biloxian had just come from drinking ice tea on her neighbor’s screened porch.

“That’s the closest you could possibly get to a Southern porch up here,” she says.

It’s been 50-odd years since the award-winning writer went north for college, and in the time since, Swan’s accomplishments are the kind people dream of moving to New



Annalyn Swan is an official panelist in this year’s Mississippi Book Festival on Aug. 21. Photo courtesy

York City to achieve. She was a music critic Annalyn Swan.
and senior editor for Newsweek in the 1980s
and has been published in the Atlantic, the New Republic and New York Magazine. In 2005,
Swan's biography of the pioneering abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning, co-authored
with her husband Mark Stevens, won the Pulitzer Prize for biography.

These days, Swan is busy teaching and promoting her and Steven's new book called "Francis Bacon: Revelations" about the Anglo-Irish painter. The 880-page tome, researched over the course of a decade, is the first comprehensive look at the artist who created some of the darkest, most twisted art of the 20th century.

Swan will be discussing her biography next month as an official panelist at the Mississippi Book Festival. In a recent interview, Swan talked about growing up in Biloxi, her love of Eudora Welty, and what it's like to be a Mississippian living outside of the Deep South.

"If you grew up a happy Mississippian, you feel kind of special," she said. "I don't think of us as 'redneck land.' I think of us as something totally different—something only we would know."

Though she didn't decide to pursue professional writing until college, Swan fell in love with stories as a kid in Biloxi.

"Growing up, I absolutely knew who Eudora Welty was, and I knew who, of course, (William) Faulkner was, and I knew who Robert Penn Warren was," she said.

Her earliest memories are of her father reading aloud classics such as "Treasure Island" and "The Jungle Book." Going to the Biloxi Public Library, a two-story Spanish Mission building a block from the Gulf, was like "walking up into this heaven of books," she said. Swan was so precocious, she read through the entire children's floor and was given special permission "to go downstairs" and read the adult books.

Her father, an insurance agent, knew everyone in town. Soon, Swan remembers, he started telling her stories about the eccentric, secretive characters who populated Biloxi. There was George Ohr, the "Mad Potter of Biloxi," and Walter Anderson, the reclusive painter from Ocean Springs who was known to spend hours sitting on his long skiff sketching birds, alligators and palmetto trees.

These stories piqued Swan's curiosity in the inner lives of artists.

“Those tales almost became to me as mythic as the reading,” she said. “It was this kind of otherworldly thing because I didn't know these painters, so they took on these great outlines of their lives.”

Swan left Biloxi in 1969 to attend Loyola University in New Orleans. After a year, she transferred to Princeton as part of the second wave of women to attend the Ivy League school. It was an “overwhelmingly male” experience, Swan said. At the time, most of the women who had stepped foot on campus were not students but “imports,” as they were called — coeds from neighboring colleges who visited the upperclassmen on the weekends.

“I remember sitting in big lecture classes and being one of four women in a sea of men,” she said. “We were always sitting together because the guys just didn't know what to make of the women.”

Since she ventured north, Swan has found herself running into Mississippians again and again. One of the first people she met at Princeton was from Yazoo City. At Time Magazine, where Swan took her first writing gig after moving to New York City in late 1975, she met one of her best friends: the late **Alice Rose George** from Silver Creek.

“Our relationship was just drenched in Mississippi,” Swan said of George. “It was so indelible, our love of history and culture—I could go on and on. Linens, you know, we all love linens, Mississippi women who go north. Linens! Gentility! Garden gloves! It's just a way of appreciating things that we grew up with.”

“But there were other Mississippians too,” she added, such as Rea Hederman, the heir to the Clarion-Ledger who purchased the New York Review of Books, and Diane Rosen, a journalist from Birmingham. “We just kind of found each other.”

Together, they convened at annual picnics in Central Park for writers from Mississippi. “We start off by saying, ‘Well I'm from Mississippi,’ and it's kind of a badge of pride.”

After a decade or so working in magazines, Swan found herself wanting to “bite into a huge piece of apple” — that is, write a book. In 1989, one of Swan's editors from Time recommended her to write a biography of de Kooning. She was interested in the project

because de Kooning reminded her of the characters she grew up with in Biloxi — artists with a complex, intense inner life.

“The more quirky and eccentric the person, the better if you’re writing about an artist,” she said, “because you want to deal with a mind that is as interesting as the art it produced.”

Swan and her husband won the Pulitzer for that work in 2005, the same year Hurricane Katrina hit her hometown. The Pulitzer resulted in an offer to write about Bacon.

“Francis Bacon was the Oscar Wilde of his day,” Swan said. “He dominated every room he was in. He was the ‘king of Soho;’ he was called the ‘sacred monster.’ He always knew he was the most important man in the room. I mean, when you have a life like that ... that is just catnip to biographers.”

Long before Swan began writing about artists, she dreamed of pursuing a biography of Eudora Welty. Swan had a connection with an editor at Random House who encouraged her to go down to Jackson to explore the idea.

So she went. Outside Welty’s house in the Belhaven neighborhood of Jackson, Swan had ice tea with a companion of Welty’s. “She said Eudora isn’t here but she’ll think about it.”

Welty decided against her proposal.

“That was my first love,” Swan said. “I wanted to write about her and immerse myself in her books. But that’s the fish that got away.”

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