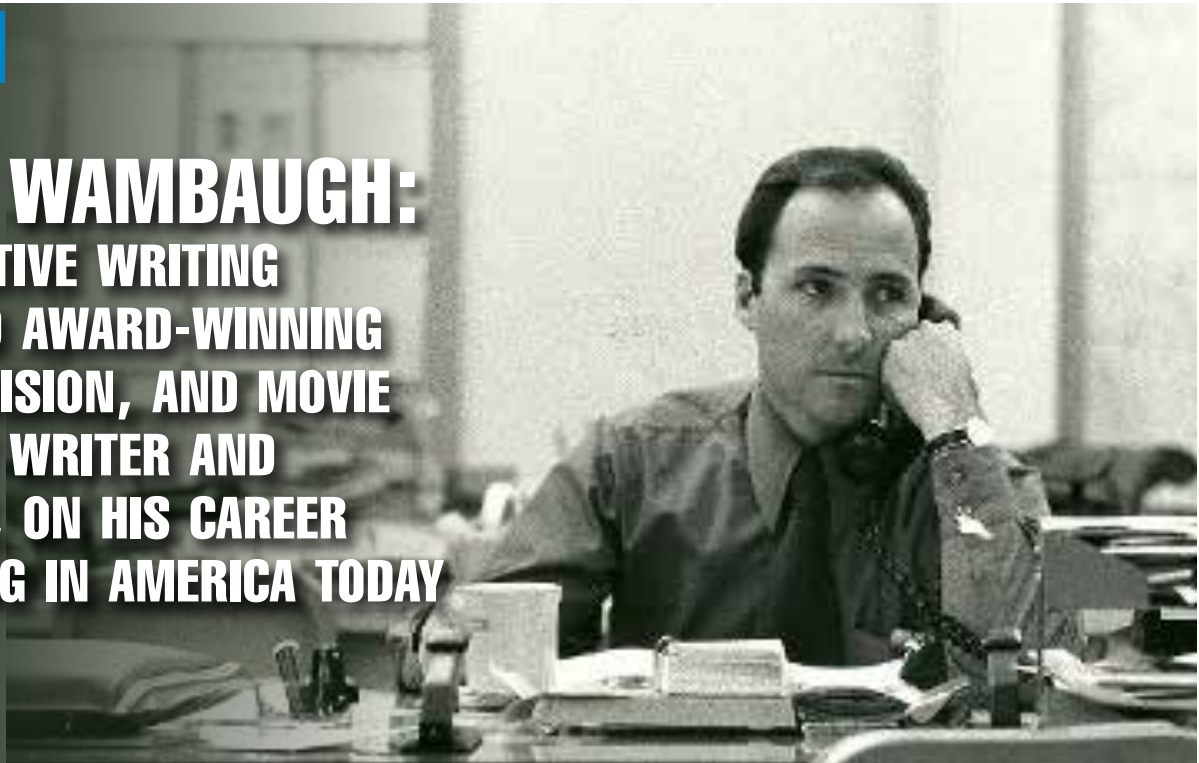


JOSEPH WAMBAUGH: A COP, CREATIVE WRITING GENIUS, AND AWARD-WINNING BOOK, TELEVISION, AND MOVIE SCREENPLAY WRITER AND CONSULTANT, ON HIS CAREER AND POLICING IN AMERICA TODAY

By Lori Cooper



A few years ago, I had the audacity to write to Joseph Wambaugh, who now casually signs his name in every response as just "Joe," or "Joe W.," a representation of how many times we've corresponded. The need for formality in his full name had now been reduced to what friends do: to simply call each other by the shortened version of their first names.

A complicated man whose tough interior shifts with topics about his days from earning an MA degree in literature, to his 21 works of best-selling nonfiction and fictional tales about the lives of the American police officer, to his titles that were adapted into major motion pictures and made-for-TV movies, Joe Wambaugh has almost come to peace with a life where he feels his work, and his name, have all but been forgotten.



After graduating from high school in Ontario, California, he entered the United States Marine Corp, serving a three-year tour-of-duty. At the age of 18, he married his high

school sweetheart, Dee Allsup. When he entered the Los Angeles Police Department in May of 1960, he'd already earned his Bachelor's degree in English, taking advantage of the G.I. Bill subsidy offered to members of the service, along with classes he could take on his off-duty hours. Wambaugh added, about his long-standing marriage to his high school sweetheart, "We were married when I was a Marine and she was a telephone operator. We are both hard workers who don't back off when things are difficult. We just had our 66th anniversary on November 26th, so the marriage will probably endure the rest of the way."

During his first eight years on the LAPD, he worked various assignments and returned to his alma mater, California State, Los Angeles, where, again, on his off-duty hours as a cop, he majored in English and earned an MA in literature by 1968. He also worked his way up the ranks to becoming a detective sergeant for the Los Angeles Police Department. He was likely the only cop to have ever earned a master's degree in literature in 1968, with his first three books he'd also write while serving

for the LAPD. Joe Wambaugh's undeniable career successes read like an A-to-Z collection of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

My late dad had been a police officer in Columbus, Ohio during a time when Wambaugh, himself, was serving for the Los Angeles Police Department. Shot in the line of duty in 1972 by a career criminal who had eluded authorities for more than four decades, I explained in my first piece of correspondence that it was my own search that had resulted in the apprehension of my late dad's shooter exactly 44 years later, a man who Wambaugh would undoubtedly call a sociopath. It was a term I had read that he used frequently through the years in relation to criminals without a conscience. In fact, I'd also read where he believed it was safe to suggest that about 95% of those who committed heinous crimes were nothing but sociopaths.

I knew I needed to write our family's true crime story, one that was so outrageous and inconceivable it defied almost every piece of fiction I had ever read, but never having written anything more than business prose, I dreamed of having the

ability to ask the 'father of the modern police novel' for any wisdom he might be up to sharing with this daughter of a late 'copper,' another Wambaugh-ism for those he admired and respected who wore blue and carried a badge: the American cop. He was kind enough to share some of his thoughts, too.

I explained to Wambaugh, in that same piece of correspondence, that my late father had been a member of the Book-of-the-Month Club in the late 1960s and early 1970s, receiving all of his books that were always best sellers. Wambaugh went for the gusto when he wrote "The New Centurions" in 1970, his novel he described as the "first really true story about modern-day policing in an urban environment." He knew that it would never be approved by the department or its then-chief, Ed Davis, so he sent it out without the department's approval.

As the story goes, Wambaugh's first novel became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and so my dad had received a copy of it, along with so many more. During a time when I was 8 years old and supposed to be reading the novels that were a part of the classics in "The Nancy Drew Mystery Stories," I was instead reading my dad's cop books written by Wambaugh about the reality of how 'the job' affected a cop's life. Many of his subjects dealt with the escape into alcohol use, marriages that failed, and all of the fortitude that went along with those who were Wambaugh's main characters in his first novel, "The New Centurions," about three academy graduates from the same class, and how their personal and professional lives as cops evolved and changed over a five-year period.

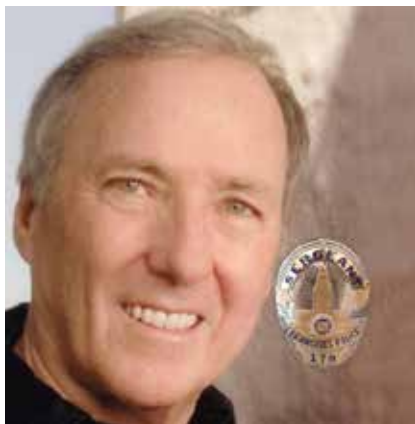
I learned about the character of William "Bumper" Morgan in Wambaugh's second book, "The Blue Knight," and the hardest 'beat' of his life in a gritty and witty beat cop who was on the verge of retirement after 20 years as a patrol officer. Cynical and idealistic at the same time, there's a little bit of "Bumper" Morgan in Joe Wambaugh, in my opinion.

But the third book of Wambaugh's career, "The Onion Field," revered as the best true-crime story ever written alongside Truman Capote's, "In Cold Blood," earned him a jacket review by Capote, something Wambaugh believed to be a real honor. When asked how he had met Truman Capote, Wambaugh explained, "I met Truman on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. He and my wife became acquainted in the Green Room, and he invited us to his Palm Springs home for lunch."

All of Wambaugh's first three books were adapted into films, with "The Onion Field" the first work of nonfiction he had written by 1973. Despite his belief that even young cops aren't aware of his name or his award-winning books and films, I have challenged him about his notion of that thought, having spoken with so many cops, retired and active-duty, who believe this title to be the one that changed the trajectory of policing forever. In my own cynical ways, I feel anyone who is or has been a cop, a reader of true crime books, or an avid viewer of true crime movies, would have to have lived under a rock to not have read, have viewed, or at least have heard about "The Onion Field." When I asked Joe about this topic, he capitulated in a response that still gives me cold shivers: "If policing became more sensitive to



the psychological wounds suffered by cops, and not just the physical wounds, then yes, I am proud of that," he replied.



Just in case there's one person or cop who hasn't heard of this book or film, it's based on the lives of LAPD Officers Ian Campbell and Karl Hettinger, who made a traffic stop in 1963. Officer Campbell's gun was stripped from him by one of two sociopaths in the vehicle, and both officers were kidnapped and driven to an onion field, where Campbell was executed, and Hettinger ran, escaping his own death. Hettinger would suffer from incredible amounts of 'survivor's guilt' and what we now know to be post-traumatic stress syndrome, otherwise called PTSD. He was forced to resign in 1966 and died at the age of 59. When I asked Joe Wambaugh out of all of his books who his favorite character was, he proclaimed, "possibly Karl Hettinger because of how much he suffered and endured."

Along the same subject matter, I asked Wambaugh, in his opinion, which film adapted from all of his books he would suggest was the best, and, while I was not surprised, he responded with "The Onion Field." When I asked why he felt it was the best, his answer was, "because it was faithful to the book. That is because I wrote the screenplay and self-financed [the film] and raised more money to maintain control [of the film]."

Wambaugh retired from the LAPD in 1974, after serving 14 years. With his first three books making the best seller lists, the first two were adapted into films rather quickly. "The New Centurions" was on The New York Times best seller list for 32 straight weeks and opened to worldwide film audiences in August of 1972, while "The Blue Knight" aired to television audiences in 1973. Joe Wambaugh had become famous, and with that fame and notoriety came a myriad of problems he deemed too disruptive to the business of police work, forcing him to leave his beloved job for the LAPD and become a full-time writer. There were pranks at his station house, some officers with whom he served who treated him differently, and guest invitations on the talk show circuit, to name a few. When I asked how many appearances he'd made on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson, alone, he answered with a humble reply of, "I don't know how many [for sure] but several."

Though he would go on to write 18 more books and create the popular television anthology, "Police Story" in 1974, Wambaugh has decidedly elected to put down his pen and paper to simply reminisce on all the work of his past, leaving future stories to those who may continue to attempt to succeed his award-winning work in true crime books and cop dramas.

Suggesting "The Sopranos" was the only television show beyond his own he ever watched with any consistency, he also has added, "I have not been approached on the street or in any public place for at least 30 years. I am not a movie star, just a writer. I am not sure that people read books the way they used to do, so my guess is that no writers are frequently recognized and approached for autographs. Not only has the general public forgotten me, but even young cops have no idea who I am these days. And not all of the older cops remember my name, either.

It's a different world, Lori."

Just like there can only be one Fred Astaire, regarded as the greatest popular-music dancer of all time, there can only be one Michael Jackson, referred to as the "King of Pop" and one of the most significant cultural figures and the greatest entertainer in the history of music. As for the greatest true crime writer of books, films, and television, particularly in the subsegment genre of cop dramas, there can only be one famed, icon, regarded as the most significant game changer in the portrayal of the life and times of the American police officer, and that individual will always be, hands-down, Joseph Aloysius Wambaugh.

Finally, when asked what recommendations he would make to anyone who wants to become a law enforcement officer, Wambaugh responded with the good humor and great candor that nobody like him possesses. He said, "In my book, Hollywood Station, 'the Oracle,' a senior sergeant, tells young cops that doing good police work is the most fun that they will ever have in their lives. I do not know if that is still true." He also noted, "If you want love, join the fire department. People needy of approval should not become cops." 🌍

Lori Cooper is the daughter of a late Columbus, Ohio police officer shot in the line of duty and whose perpetrator eluded authorities for 44 years until her own search resulted in his apprehension. Her story, featured by hundreds of news organizations, catapulted her to success as an expert law enforcement advocate, where she now writes for law enforcement media groups and is a highly acclaimed guest on national radio and television. An Ohio University Social Studies Major, she has written a book about her story, titled THE SOUND OF SILENCE. She can be reached at www.WriterLoriCooper.com.

