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UNC alumna Nancy Stancill writes memoir detailing life as an investigative reporter



Photo courtesy of Nancy Stancill.

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By [Lily Chubb](#)

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UNC and Daily Tar Heel alumna Nancy Stancill's career in investigative journalism inspired her to write two mystery novels and, most recently, a memoir.

Stancill's memoir, "Tall: Love and Journalism in a Six-foot World," was published on Nov. 24, 2020, and covers Stancill's career as well as her personal life.

"I just thought it would be a good place to examine my life so far and maybe leave something of value to my 3-year-old granddaughter," Stancill said.

Stancill was born in Elizabethton, Tennessee, and moved to Radford, Virginia, at the age of 8. She attended UNC from 1967 to 1971, a time in which both the nation and the University were fraught with protest and change.

Stancill worked at The Daily Tar Heel during her time at UNC, which she described as a good and bad experience.

"I remember one day I was allowed to interview the chancellor, and I was so excited," she said. "And then there was the incident where one of the top reporters asked me to sharpen his pencils, which was very obnoxious."

During her first year at UNC, Stancill lived under rules specifically for women that were punishable by expulsion if broken. The one

she said was most infuriating was "closed study," which mandated that first-year women had to be in their rooms studying from 8 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. on weeknights, and was later eliminated by Stancill's sophomore year.

After graduating from UNC in 1971, Stancill worked at newspapers in Virginia and California before moving to Houston, Texas, with her husband.

Stancill then began her 15-year career for the Houston Chronicle in 1978, where she worked her way up to the investigative team. She said her biggest story was about a variety of misdeeds at a community college in Killeen, Texas, including that the administration was mismanaging money.

"That was the only time I was really afraid for my safety," she said. "Someone who blew the whistle on this college drowned, and I was told by sources, too, that I was being followed. Someone sent me a wanted poster that I was in and said that the administration should know if I ever stepped foot on campus."

Don Mason, who was the principal editor on that story, said that Stancill exhibited great bravery in her reporting.

"I knew all the stuff she was doing over there in Killeen and some of the other projects she worked at, but I don't think I appreciated how much personal danger she felt," Mason said. "She's brave, I mean, she did what a reporter does, and it was not always comfortable."

Stancill left Houston in 1993 and joined the investigative team at The Charlotte Observer in North Carolina.

For a story called "Starving the Wife," Stancill investigated divorce cases in which husbands would wait a long time to settle, during which the wives were left in poverty and forced to accept much less than they deserved. She used computer analysis to determine that the average case was taking more than two years to settle.

Her story pushed the state to change some of the rules on divorce cases and caused the judges in Mecklenburg County to change some of their procedures and to institute mediation.

"There were a variety of reforms from that series," she said. "It was probably the best thing I did there."

After she left the Observer, she lived in London for three years with her husband and spent time traveling. She decided to write her first novel, "Saving Texas," about a young journalist who becomes involved in investigating a secessionist gubernatorial candidate.

After her first novel was a success, she got a creative writing degree through the University of Tampa's master's program, which resulted in her thesis and second book, "Winning Texas."

Stancill's readers have praised her for her bravery in writing about personal traumas as well as her career in her recent memoir.

Stancill's former editor, Steve Gunn, said that Stancill's memoir is entertaining and gives useful advice to aspiring journalists.

"I really do think it should be required reading for young journalists, because it's about both big stories and all that, but also how you balance a career in your personal life," Gunn said.

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