



## Cooper, Anderson (b. 1967)

by Linda Rapp

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Anderson Cooper.  
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Award-winning television journalist Anderson Cooper has traveled the globe, reporting from war zones and scenes of natural and man-made disasters, as well as covering stories on political and social issues. Cooper is a ubiquitous presence on American television, for in addition to being a news anchor, he also hosts a talk show.

Cooper is the son of heiress and designer Gloria Vanderbilt and her fourth husband, Wyatt Cooper. In his memoir, *Dispatches from the Edge* (2006), Cooper stated that his parents' "backgrounds could not have been more different."

Whereas his mother descends from one of American best-known and wealthiest families, his father was born into a poor farm family in the small town of Quitman, Mississippi. When he was sixteen he moved to the Ninth Ward of New Orleans with his mother and five of his seven siblings. Anderson Cooper wrote that his "father fell in love with New Orleans from the start" and delighted in its culture.

After graduating from Francis T. Nicholls High School, however, Wyatt Cooper headed to California to pursue his dream of becoming an actor. Although he found work on both screen and stage, he eventually turned to screenwriting for Twentieth Century Fox.

Wyatt Cooper and Vanderbilt married in 1964 and took up residence in a luxurious mansion in New York City. The couple had two sons, Carter, born in 1965, and Anderson, born on June 3, 1967.

Vanderbilt, whose father died when she was a baby and whose socialite mother lost custody of her in a family dispute that was a tabloid sensation in the 1930s, was determined to be engaged in her sons' lives and to give them the happy childhood she missed. "From the very beginning," she told Jonathan Van Meter of *New York Magazine*, "we included them in everything," citing examples of parties attended by celebrities such as Charlie Chaplin, Lillian Gish, and Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. In his memoir Cooper recalled that "Truman Capote was a frequent guest" as well, as was Andy Warhol.

Wyatt Cooper, for his part, made sure that his son was cognizant of his heritage from his side of the family. He took him to Quitman and New Orleans and also wrote a book entitled *Families: A Memoir and a Celebration* (1975) that became a touchstone for Anderson. "To me it's sort of a letter from him to me and sort of a guide on . . . how he wanted me to live my life and the choices he would have wanted me to make. And I feel very connected to him," he told Van Meter.

Wyatt Cooper died during heart bypass surgery when his younger son was just ten years old. The boy was devastated by the loss and yet, he wrote in his memoir, "as hard as his death was for me, for my brother it must have been even worse."

In the wake of his father's death, young Anderson Cooper decided that he should be independent and earn money by himself, and so he became a clothing model. "It's embarrassing," he said to Van Meter, but "there's

not many jobs a 10-year-old can get." Cooper persevered with the work for three years.

During Cooper's high school years his independent streak continued. He went on survival courses, mountain-climbing in the Rockies and kayaking in Mexico. Having completed his academic requirements at the private Dalton School in Manhattan a semester early, he went off on another survival adventure to southern and central Africa, "a place," he wrote, "to forget, and to be forgotten in." While there he contracted malaria and had to be hospitalized in Kenya, a fact of which he failed to apprise his mother until he returned home.

In the fall of 1984 Cooper enrolled at Yale University, where he studied political science and international relations and also participated in athletics as the coxswain of a rowing crew.

On July 22, 1988, soon before Cooper was to begin his senior year at the university, his brother, Carter, committed suicide, jumping off the terrace outside Anderson's bedroom in the family's fourteenth-floor penthouse apartment while their frantic mother entreated him to come back off the ledge.

Carter left no suicide note. Vanderbilt speculated that he may have had an adverse reaction to an allergy medicine that he had recently begun to take, but the family would never know for certain what had driven him to the drastic act.

Anderson Cooper considered staying in New York with his mother after the tragedy, but she insisted that he return to Yale to complete his degree. She was well aware of the turmoil that it caused him at the time and the impact on his future career, telling Van Meter that the deaths of his father and brother "are the two events that affected him at a gut level. Later, when he became a reporter, it enabled him to do this with compassion and maturity beyond his years. I've always thought that TV is like an X-ray. And when you see Anderson on TV, what you see is what you get. He really is like that."

Upon graduating from Yale in 1989, Cooper sought to pursue a career in journalism, but his application for an entry-level job with ABC News did not even result in an interview. He subsequently landed a position as a fact-checker for the program *Channel One*, a twelve-minute daily news production shown in American high schools. Cooper longed to be a foreign correspondent, however, and came up with a plan that he would later call "very simple, and monumentally stupid."

Having decided that "stories [that] were interesting and inexpensive" and originated in "dangerous or exotic" locales might get air time on *Channel One*, Cooper quit his fact-checking job, had a friend mock up a fake press pass on a computer and lend him a Hi-8 camera, and, in December 1991, headed off to Thailand, where he met some Burmese refugees fighting against the military dictatorship in their country.

The Burmese freedom fighters secreted Cooper across the border and into their camp in the jungle, where, with the sound of mortar fire in the background, he saw the horror of an improvised field hospital. *Channel One* bought his video, but, more importantly, Cooper recognized that he had found his professional calling. "I knew that this was the career I wanted," he recalled in his memoir. "I couldn't imagine doing anything else."

Cooper followed through with his plan to report from scenes of the human struggle for survival, from war zones to regions stricken by famine. He worked as a free-lancer, selling his stories to *Channel One* until, after he submitted a series of reports from Somalia, he earned a post as their lead international correspondent.

His work took him to hot spots, including the Balkans, countries of the former Soviet Union, Haiti, Indonesia, and, in 1994, Rwanda. After covering the genocide there, Cooper reassessed his mission: "I didn't want to see any more death," he declared in his memoir. He allowed his contract with *Channel One* to

expire.

Meanwhile, his work had caught the eye of the news department at ABC, which, in 1995, hired him as a correspondent. Cooper was assigned to *World News Now*, which aired at 3 o'clock in the morning, and, he stated to Van Meter, "no one within ABC actually watched."

However, during this period he did contribute segments to ABC's newsmagazine *20/20*. Indeed, he won a GLAAD Award in the category of "Outstanding TV Journalism" in 2001 for a *20/20* segment on openly gay high school athlete Corey Johnson.

Fearing that his career in news was stalling, Cooper accepted ABC's offer to become the host of its reality show *The Mole* in 2000. Based on a Belgian program, *The Mole* sent an initial contingent of ten people to sites around the globe to compete in various contests while also trying to figure out the identity of "the mole," an individual employed by the producers to pose as an ordinary contestant but whose role was to create confusion.

*The Mole* did not match the success of the wildly popular *Survivor* series on CBS, but it achieved respectable ratings.

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, "I wanted to be reporting again," Cooper stated to Andrew Ryan of the Toronto *Globe and Mail*. In January 2002 he joined CNN as an anchor and correspondent. The fit seemed a good one for him because, as he told Ryan, "At CNN, there's a sort of purity to the mission, which is nice. We're all about news, wherever it happens in the world. And the global resources we have to draw on are astounding."

Cooper was initially teamed with Paula Zahn to co-anchor a morning news show. However, in May, upon his return from an assignment in Afghanistan, he substituted for host Aaron Brown on *NewsNight*, and the audience response was so enthusiastic that he was given his own show, *Anderson Cooper 360°* (now known as *AC 360*), in September.

There had been speculation among the public that Cooper was gay, and it was fueled in the wake of a contentious interview with the homophobic Christian fundamentalist minister Jerry Falwell in 2004 during which, some thought, Cooper said, in reference to gay men and lesbians, "We pay taxes." The transcript eventually posted on-line by CNN read "You pay taxes," which Cooper claimed was what he had said.

Cooper dodged the issue in his 2005 interview with Van Meter, stating, "I just don't talk about my personal life. . . . The whole thing about being a reporter is that you're supposed to be an observer and to be able to adapt with any group you're in, and I don't want to do anything that threatens that."

At the end of 2004 Cooper was dispatched to Sri Lanka, the scene of a disastrous tsunami. Based in a devastated beachfront hotel the lobby of which was still festooned with Christmas decorations, Cooper went into the field with his crew, witnessing the carnage, talking with survivors, and trying, unsuccessfully, to find the remains of two children named Sunera and Jinandari.

Of the experience he wrote, "We end up working around the clock: shooting all day, writing and editing most of the night. Every report is the same: incalculable loss, unspeakable pain."

Within a week he was back in New York, covering the drop of the ball in Times Square at the start of 2005.

Cooper would go off to report from Iraq and then to Niger, where he witnessed the appalling toll of famine and the heroism of doctors and other dedicated volunteers fighting for others far from home.

In late August, Cooper was vacationing in Croatia when his executive producer called him back to the United States to cover a hurricane that was threatening the Gulf coast. When Katrina made landfall in Louisiana on August 29, Cooper had reached Baton Rouge, from which he proceeded to Mississippi, following the path of the storm.

The next morning found him in Philadelphia, Mississippi—and cut off from all forms of communication until an engineer managed to make a telephone connection from their truck. Cooper and his team made their way south through Mississippi, traveling through scenes of massive destruction as they headed for New Orleans, where the levees had failed and the city was flooding.

The following day, in Waveland, Mississippi, Cooper interviewed FEMA director Michael Brown, who, in answer to Cooper's observation of "not seeing much of a response" to the catastrophe, called the agency's actions "unacceptable" but declared that he was "working on it." A FEMA official called Cooper to invite him and his crew to follow Brown and cover his activities the next day, but, in a second call, the invitation was withdrawn.

Cooper proceeded to New Orleans. Moving around the city, often by boat, he observed the rescue of some desperate survivors trapped by the filthy floodwater, but he also saw corpses of people and animals who had perished because no help had arrived in time for them.

Cooper reacted viscerally to the horror that he was witnessing, sometimes moved to the point of weeping, which he tried—not always successfully—not to do on camera. His strong emotional response drew comment from the public, and he addressed the matter in an interview with Elizabeth Jensen of the *New York Times*, saying, "I have been tearing up on this story more than any story I've worked on. I can't really explain why that it is," but, he noted, "The fact that it is in the United States, for me, added a layer and dimension to the story."

A few days after the failure of the levees, Cooper interviewed Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, whose thanks to politicians doing too little too late were more than he could bear. After apologizing for interrupting her, Cooper told Landrieu that "for the last four days I've been seeing dead bodies in the streets. . . . And to listen to politicians thanking each other and complimenting each other—you know, I've got to tell you, there are a lot of people here who are very upset, and very angry, and very frustrated."

With "silence in my ear" during a subsequent commercial break, Cooper wrote in his memoir, "I worry I've crossed the line" with a statement that might be considered rude or disrespectful.

While his words may have surprised some viewers, they also drew praise from commentators such as David Carr of the *New York Times*, who stated that "Mr. Cooper's well-shaded outrage—he stopped just this short of editorializing—elicited the kind of anger that has been mostly missing from a toothless press" in the coverage of Katrina.

Cooper's work in New Orleans earned him a 2006 Emmy Award for Outstanding Story in a Regularly Scheduled Newscast for his reporting on the dire situation at Charity Hospital. The same year he also won the Emmy for Outstanding Live Coverage of a Breaking News Story for his reporting from Niger.

Cooper's coverage of Hurricane Katrina also earned CNN a coveted Peabody Award for outstanding journalism. His concern with New Orleans went beyond covering the hurricane and its immediate aftermath, however. For several years, he continued to monitor the city's rebuilding and its coping with issues such as crime and corruption.

Cooper returned to Louisiana in 2010 to cover the catastrophic BP oil well explosion and subsequent gushing of oil into the Gulf. Once again, he did not shrink from pointing out the hard facts, leading Brian Stetler of the *New York Times* to observe that Cooper "has become one of the loudest media voices on behalf of gulf residents, reprising a role he played in the wake of Hurricane Katrina."

Cooper, despite his tenacity, told Stetler that on "many nights . . . I, and I think my guests, feel like we're shouting into a wind tunnel," but at least one guest, Plaquemines Parish President Billy Nungesser, testified to the efficacy of Cooper's journalism, telling him in an interview on Cooper's program that President Obama "made me commit and I agreed that, if we have the same mess-up in the chain of command, or things not getting done, that I will give him a call at the White House before I call you, Anderson," adding, "you've been a great help here."

Stetler described Cooper as "Mister Disaster" at CNN for frequently being first on the scene and deeply involved in presenting the truth and extent of a situation—keeping them honest" as the slogan of his show says. Cooper's prompt response to and thorough coverage of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti earned him two more Emmy Awards, in the same categories for which had had previously won, as well as the awarding of the National Order of Honour and Merit from the government of the country.

In addition to covering stories of massive and visible physical destruction, Cooper also turned his attention to less evident but no less important matters, including a three-part series in June 2011 on *Anderson Cooper 360°* entitled "The Sissy Boy Experiment," debunking the myth of "reparative therapy," a psychological treatment that proponents claim can turn glbtq people heterosexual.

In the series, which was honored with a GLAAD Media Award for "Outstanding TV Journalism" in 2012, Cooper highlighted the case of Kirk Murphy, who was treated as a small child and declared "cured" by George Rekers, a co-founder of the Family Research Council, but was suffering so much that he attempted suicide at the age of seventeen. Murphy would later come out as gay, but, still tormented, took his own life when he was thirty-eight.

Cooper pursued a related topic with a week of reporting in October 2011 on glbtq children and others perceived as different, culminating in a CNN special report, "Bullying: It Stops Here."

Cooper also addressed the issue of the bullying of glbtq youth by devoting an episode of his daytime talk show, *Anderson*, to the topic, and including an interview with the family of Jamey Rodemeyer, a fourteen-year-old who committed suicide after being tormented by schoolmates.

The talk show, which debuted in September 2011, could be seen as a somewhat curious career choice for Cooper since the content generally does not include examination of weighty issues. Cooper explained his decision to go in the new direction by telling Carr "I want to have real conversations with people and tell their stories. I am personally happiest when I do multiple things, and I think people understand that we all have multiple interests."

In July 2012 Cooper put an end to the speculation about his sexual orientation in a frank statement to Andrew Sullivan of *The Daily Beast*.

Cooper declared that he had sought "to maintain some level of privacy in [his] life" partly "for purely personal reasons" but also because of professional concerns: "Since I started as a reporter in war zones 20 years ago, I've often found myself in some very dangerous places. For my safety and the safety of those I work with, I try to blend in as much as possible, and prefer to stick to my job of telling other people's stories, and not my own."

Eventually, though, he told Sullivan, he became concerned about "the unintended consequences" of his

silence: "I have given some the mistaken impression that I am trying to hide something&mdash;something that makes me uncomfortable, ashamed or even afraid. This is distressing because it is simply not true. . . . The fact is, I'm gay, always have been, always will be, and I couldn't be more happy, comfortable with myself, and proud. . . . I love, and I am loved."

Cooper's announcement was met by the public with a general lack of surprise. In coming out, he joins such other noted openly gay or lesbian television news anchors and reporters as Rachel Maddow, Thomas Roberts, Don Lemon, Jane Velez-Mitchell, Jeffrey Kofman, Pete Williams, Manuel Gallegus, and Miguel Marquez. But his status as super-star journalist, coupled with his personal popularity, made his confirmation of an open secret particularly noteworthy in glbtq circles and sparked a discussion of the protocol of celebrities coming out, with some writers noting that Cooper followed the current fashion of coming out as casually as possible.

Cooper has been the partner of Benjamin Maisani since 2009. Maisani, a native of Corsica who studied Art History at Hunter College, is the co-owner of a gay bar in the East Village called Eastern Bloc. The couple is said to be considering marriage in New York, where they reside and where marriage equality has been achieved.

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