

Obituaries

Charles Trueheart, Post reporter and author who ‘could do it all,’ dies at 75

He profiled John Updike and Norman Mailer, served as a foreign correspondent in Canada and France, and wrote a prizewinning book about the Vietnam War.

Yesterday at 17:48 France Time

► 6 min



Charles Trueheart worked at The Washington Post for 14 years. He later led the American Library in Paris. (Family photo)

By [Matt Schudel](#)

Charles Trueheart, who wrote elegant profiles for The Washington Post and served as a foreign correspondent before drawing on his family’s experiences in an acclaimed book about the Vietnam War, died Sept. 15 at his home in Staunton, Virginia. He was 75.

The cause was cancer, said his wife, Anne Swardson, a former journalist at Bloomberg and The Post.

The son of a career diplomat, Mr. Trueheart spent much of his childhood abroad, spoke fluent French and published his first book at 19 before turning to journalism.

He joined The Post in 1986 as a writer in the Style section, penning a weekly column about magazines and becoming something of a specialist in probing studies of literary lions, including [Gore Vidal](#), [Norman Mailer](#), [Graham Greene](#), [John Updike](#) and [John le Carré](#).

Mr. Trueheart’s profiles seemed to have as much depth of character and stylistic élan as the writings of his subjects. Updike’s literary alter ego, Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, “might usefully be regarded as the less talented and less fortunate slightly younger brother he might have left behind in Pennsylvania — a self Updike escaped, in a way, a mode not taken.”

The pugilistic Mailer, who had stabbed one of his six wives and was a scabrous critic of the U.S. government, had just completed “Harlot’s Ghost,” a 1,300-page “monsterpiece” about the CIA, when Mr. Trueheart met him in 1991: “He seems entirely kind, the bark of his reputation worse than the bite of his presence.”

In 1988, Mr. Trueheart visited Greene, the shadowy 83-year-old British author whose novels often touched on the morally twisted lives of burned-out spies, at his modest apartment on the French Riviera.

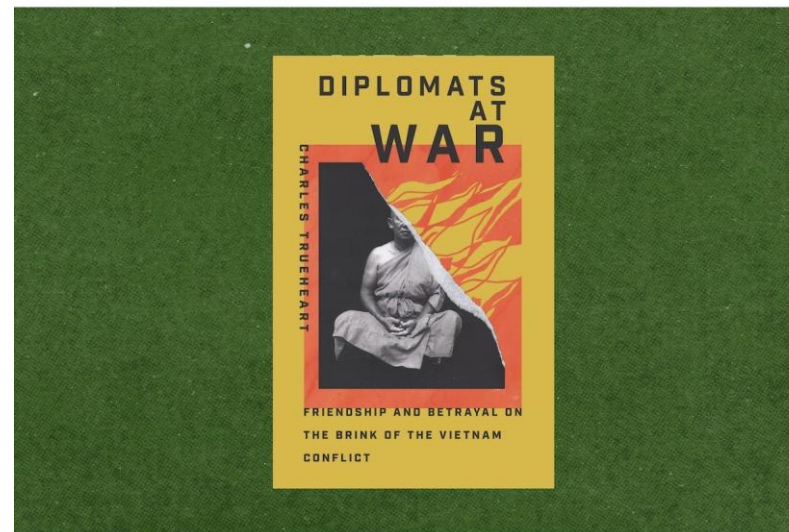
“Greene himself, in his beige leisure wear, doesn’t seem a man inclined to the wracked anguish of his characters,” he wrote. “His watery blue eyes suggest serenity, and the rest of him a certain frailness: the stooped shoulders on the high narrow frame, the dangling arms ending in arthritic twists.”

Mr. Trueheart’s “writing skills were so comprehensive,” Robert Wilson, his editor at USA Today and other publications, said in an email, “from a lovely quick-turnaround piece when E.B. White died, to a thoughtful assessment of Jacques Derrida’s contribution to the culture, to engaging writer profiles ... He could do it all.”

In 1992, Mr. Trueheart and his wife, Swardson, became The Post’s correspondents in Toronto. Four years later, they moved to the paper’s Paris bureau. Mr. Trueheart reported from throughout Europe, including coverage of the war-crimes investigation of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

When their assignment ended in 2000, the couple stayed on in Paris, where Mr. Trueheart had lived as a child. They raised their own children there and led a bilingual life. Mr. Trueheart became the board chairman of the American Cathedral in Paris and, from 2007 to 2017, was director of the American Library in Paris, the largest English-language library on the European continent and something of a community center for Americans in Paris.

After years of research, Mr. Trueheart in 2024 published “Diplomats at War,” a book exploring U.S. statecraft and subterfuge in Vietnam. It was also a personal story about his father, William C. Trueheart, who was the No. 2 U.S. envoy in Saigon in the early 1960s and worked alongside his close friend, ambassador Frederick E. “Fritz” Nolting Jr. Nolting was Mr. Trueheart’s godfather.



Mr. Trueheart’s “Diplomats at War” explored U.S. statecraft and subterfuge in Vietnam. (University of Virginia Press)