

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

EVAN THOMAS  
*THE SOUL OF AMERICA*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Evan Thomas**  
**Journalist and Author**  
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**Interviewed by Katie Davison**  
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START TC: 01:00:00:00

EVAN THOMAS:

Evan Thomas, and I've worked with and for Jon Meacham for many years.

## **Meeting Jon Meacham**

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EVAN THOMAS:

I was an editor at Newsweek, and the young Jon Meacham, and he's 25 years old, maybe, walks into my office as a newly hired writer at Newsweek magazine. And I instantly saw how talented he was, how funny he was, how bright he was. And I realized right away, we'd all be working for him very soon. What I remember was that he actually remembered what was in my book, I was pretty impressed by that. He had a better memory of my book than I did, and I wrote it. That it had an impact on him. He was also a good old suck up who knew how to flatter the guy he was talking to. But you know, it worked, I was flattered. And not just because he has great flattery skills,

although he does, but because he's unbelievably knowledgeable and sophisticated for a 25-year-old young man, boy, it seemed to me. He just was worldly, and seemed to know everything and about everybody. And also, that's something else, his deep sense of human nature that is hard to come by. He had that from the very beginning. He was prematurely wise. I'm not exactly sure how he got that way, but he was a wise old man when he was a very young man. And you could feel that, you could hear it. You could sense it. He just wasn't ponderous about it. He didn't pronounce or sound wise and Solomonic. He was funny and quick and modest. But you just sensed that he had a kind of inner wisdom.

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He had a sense of humor about himself. Even when he was being pompous, even when he was being a pompous young man, which of course he could be, he was funny about it. He knew that he sounded... that it was kind of slightly ridiculous that this 25-year-old could quote Arthur Schlesinger on command. Or James Madison, or Thomas Jefferson. He knew that about himself.

### **Working with Meacham at Newsweek**

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EVAN THOMAS:

Newsweek in 1993 was still a premier publication that reached millions of Americans, that formed a lot of opinions amongst the educated class, if you will. It was a powerhouse, still. And sort of thought of itself that way, was a little arrogant in its wisdom or judgment. It knew that it was a taste-maker

and opinion-maker and acted accordingly. Jon had no trouble walking into this world and taking it by storm as a 25-year-old. Charlie Peters has got to be the greatest talent scout ever, and employed a series, or hired a series of very bright young men, mostly, some women but mostly men, who were precocious and had opinions long before they were entitled to have opinions. Jon was the latest in a string of them, including Jim Fallows and David Ignatius, and just a whole bunch of them. And Charlie spotted Jon. And Jon came with a ready set of opinions and judgments, but also with some modesty. And facile writing style. And was a total success from the get-go. Generally speaking, at a big news magazine, it takes you a while to succeed. There are other people in line. Jon ascended instantly, I've never seen anything like it, except for with the possible exception of Walter Isaacson at time. But Jon just rose within about two weeks it seemed, we made him the nation editor. We, the editors at Newsweek, made him the nation editor because we could just see he was better than everybody else, even if he was younger.

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It was his maturity and judgment and sense of humor, and worldliness. And he was a great writer, he was a quick writer. And he just could cut to the chase, which in news magazines is important. He knew what the story was quickly, and he was articulate. And also he had a sense of the zeitgeist. He wasn't too far to the left, he wasn't too far to the right. This news magazine tended to be somewhat middle of the road, probably left of center. But pretty middle of the road because they're a mass audience publication, they can't get too far out on one wing or the other. It was obvious that Jon Meacham

was better than the rest of us—it was. Anybody who opened their eyes could see that. And so it was just a matter of time before he became managing editor, and then finally the editor of Newsweek. It was just a question of waiting his turn, and not waiting that long.

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I think it's fair to say he didn't arrive fully formed. I'm making him seem like Venus out of the half shell, that he's, you know, down from god. No, of course, he's a kid, he still has to learn. He is still evolving. But it was in a fairly predictable direction in the sense that, he was conservative, kind of, but again he had this capacity to see that society evolves, and he was sensitive to that. And he was going to evolve with it. So, he was learning, you could see him... Like any great student of the liberal arts he's learning all the time. He's a constant sponge soaking up personalities and facts and information, and theories too. And yes, he's evolving but it's organic. It's sort of, you can see it happening before your very eyes. He's not lurching from one side to the other. He's just growing like a flower. I remember thinking he was a slightly ridiculous figure at Newsweek because people usually dress sloppily and they were a little hip. And Meacham always wore kind of a neat suit, and it wasn't Brooks Brothers but it was something like that. And he was sort of, his hair was carefully combed. And he had this kind of... In the old days he had this slight waddle as he went down the hallway. He would sort of waddle, and he was kind of prematurely old and an old-fashioned figure surrounded by a lot of people who were trying to be hip. And it was incongruous. And I think he took some grief for it, I think people kind of laughed at it a little bit. But they weren't laughing when he was working on their copy.

### **Young Meacham's political views**

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EVAN THOMAS:

Jon, coming from the south, was somewhat to the right of your standard issue Harvard liberals. He'd gone to Sewanee, the University of the South. He was more conservative than your typical Yale student. But he wasn't all that conservative. He was mostly a 19th century liberal who believed in individual rights, and fairness and equality. And was also not doctrinaire. I mean, to be pompous about this, I would say he was a Burkean. He was a conservative who realized that change had to come. That you couldn't be stuck in place. That society was going to change, but it should do so gradually and with reverence for the traditions that came before.

### **Being an influence for Meacham**

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EVAN THOMAS:

I mean, Jon was developing a worldview from many sources, I might have been one of them. He did read *The Wise Men*. I could talk the talk of the cold war establishment. You know, as a creature of the east coast liberal establishment, and I suppose I exuded that. And that was a useful thing for Jon to hear that and absorb that. So maybe I had some impact on him. But really, Jon was drawing water from many wells, and inspiration from a lot of

different sources. That's one of his gifts, is that he can learn from many different places.

### **Becoming friends with Meacham**

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EVAN THOMAS:

I befriended him instantly because he was such a lovely guy. I mean, he was so much fun and so much fun to talk to. And if I could help him I wished to, because it was just obvious what a talent he was. And you know, a woman named Ann McDaniel and I certainly made it our business to try to advance Jon's career. It wasn't that hard. I mean, he was so talented that... We didn't see something that other people didn't see. We may have been more in his corner early on, but it was just obvious to me, Jon was better than everybody.

### **Knowing that Meacham would become a writer**

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EVAN THOMAS:

I'm sure I guessed right away that he wanted to write books, because he liked popular history, he was clearly going to be good at it. I don't remember off a moment in which he said to me, "I'm going to write books." I think it was just obvious that he would and that they were going to be good books.

**Meacham's work at Newsweek when the news magazine business was changing**

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EVAN THOMAS:

Jon had the misfortune to come in as the editor of Newsweek just as Newsweek was about to die. I don't mean literally, because it still exists, but the news magazine model was breaking just as he got the top job. And so even Jon Meacham could not save Newsweek, nobody could. The model was broken. He gave it a good shot, he really tried to produce a quality publication. He taught me a lot. I mean he talks about me teaching him, really, it's the other way around, I learned from him. Lessons that I should have learned long before, about being humble about what it is we do. What do I mean by that? Newsweek had kind of a snarky tone, a kind of a little bit know-it-all, "We know, you don't, we're going to tell you what to know," tone. And I embodied that tone, I knew how to write that way, this sort of vaguely Olympian tone. Jon taught me something about modesty which was, do not presume that the people you're writing about are a bunch of dunces. That's just not true, they're human beings. Yes, they make mistakes. Yes, they're flawed. Yes, what they did yesterday was maybe wrong. But that doesn't mean they're terrible people, or that they can't be redeemed. And don't write about them with a snotty attitude, you know? Write about them in a fair and open and respectful way. You can have a little fun with it and make it lively. But don't condescend to the people you're writing about. Jon didn't learn that from me, I learned that from him.

**Meacham's personality**

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EVAN THOMAS:

Jon is courtly, and has a polite and courtly and respectful manner that maybe a wise-ass Harvard guy like me does not have. So it is a little bit cultural. But I think it transcends culture, I really do. I think in his case it's partly religious. I mean, it's a sense of forgiveness and decency born of his Christian faith. But it is a little culturally different from the kind of wise-ass attitude that northeasterners like me were guilty of. I mean, the one reason why Jon works is because he's not holier than thou. He's funny and irreverent, I mean, wickedly irreverent. He can get away with saying stuff that other people just can't get away with. Because I think people sense in him a sense of forgiveness, so that even though he's making a wise-ass remark that's kind of borderline outrageous, people sense that he's really not that way. He's not really, in some larger sense, he's not judging them. Quite the opposite. He has a sense of the redeemable side of human nature, that people aren't... they may seem wicked but they have a good side. And if you are patient and wait for it, the good side eventually will show.



**What drives Jon Meacham**

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EVAN THOMAS:

Jon is completely driven. Jon has been driven ever since I knew him. I mean, how do you think he got to be so successful? He's graceful about it, he has a sense of grace and sense of humor, but of course he's driven. How else could he do everything he's done? Most great people, it's not that easy to figure out exactly what drives them. Jon is driven, certainly by some good things. By his desire to be a good father, his desire to be a good husband, his desire to be a good friend. Jon has a desire to see what is good in America and to let people know it, while being realistic about what's not so good in America, and what has even been wicked and evil in America in the past. Jon knows all that, but he has a sense of, above all things, a sense of redemption. And that people can be redeemed. And that even people who have taken the wrong turn can find the light, or their successors can find the light. That even if we're stuck in a dark place there is a way out, and the history shows we've done this again and again and again.

**Meacham's vision of religion and society**

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EVAN THOMAS:

Jon is religious. Jon is a faithful Christian who believes in Christian dogma. But the essential message that Jon believes in, leaving aside theology, is that

human beings are sinful, yes we are, but that we're not hopelessly sinful. That we can be redeemed. That through faith and hope and charity we can get to a better place. And that we've done this all through our history, even as we've wreaked havoc and started wars and oppressed peoples and enslaved peoples, and committed mayhem, over time the arc of history does bend upwards towards justice. And particularly in the United States of America that's been true, for all of our immense flaws and our current problems. The history of the United States is one of hope and one of progress. Through some dark nights, but eventually to the dawn. I'm a little more cynical than Jon. I've tried to learn from Jon. I have tried to make myself more hopeful because of his message. He has taught me to be more hopeful. But my natural starting place is a little darker and a little bit more cynical. I wasn't exactly wallowing in cynicism when I met Jon, but I was pretty cynical. And Jon has helped me learn, not so much as a religious message although I respect that, but just through his sense of history and his sense of human nature, to be a little bit more forgiving, forbearing, and hopeful.

**Talking to Meacham while he was writing “The Soul of America”**

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EVAN THOMAS:

Well what I remember is Jon finding various incidents in our past that reminded us not to despair, and that the ones that come to mind... He's very good on the Lost Cause, for instance—that after the Civil War the south fastened on to this fake story, basically fake story, kind of romantic but

untrue story. And it led us to a bad place, the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow. And it all seemed pretty grim, and yet we did get out of that. I mean, the Civil Rights Movement did happen. You know, he has that photograph of the Klan marching down Pennsylvania Avenue. Thousands of people in white robes. I mean, some number of governors of the United States, and senators, were members of the Klan. That was a bad place in the 1920s. And yet, we came out of it. You know, Brown v. Board of Education did happen, the Civil Rights Movement did happen. So I remember him talking about that and his fascination with learning more about the lost cause. So I remember that. I know we talked about McCarthyism, what a dark night that was in the early 1950s, but how we came out of that. And so I was talking to him about this. In the context of modern times, which seem to many people to be pretty dark, you know, Jon's saying, "Yeah, they're pretty dark, but they've been dark before."

### **Meacham's understanding of separation of powers**

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EVAN THOMAS:

Jon has a keen appreciation of the importance of the separation of powers. I mean, not to sound like a civics book here, but Jon really gets the idea that the founders understood that if you concentrate power, bad things are going to happen. If you give too much power to one party or one person or one cause, ugly things happen. But if you spread out power, if you have checks and balances, if you have different branches of government, if you have the

press checking government and all of us being checked by religion, and variations on that theme, it's going to work out better for everybody. Because there's a natural energy towards corruption. Power corrupts, it's a cliché but Jon believes that. And the genius of the founders was to spread out power and to separate power and to have checks on power. The great genius of John Adams was to look at himself and see a vain, vainglorious, ambitious person and think, "I'm a leader, I need to be checked. Somebody like me, we need to have checks. If I'm in charge that's dangerous." And Jon got that and gets that in a way that a lot of people don't.

### **Meacham's style as a journalist and writer**

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EVAN THOMAS:

A lot of journalists like me are a little cynical and mostly look in terms of sort of taking pot shots at authority and kind of revel in it. Jon is another step here, which is that... Well that's all fine, we can do that, but we really do perform this historic function of being a check on power. He's not pompous about it, but he sees his own role, as a journalist he saw his own role, as being a check on power. But also be somebody shedding light into dark corners. Not just investigative light, but also just explaining what's going on. Talking about history. You know, Jon writes brilliantly about religion in the third century to make us better understand how Christianity sold itself. I mean, pick a century, he can do it. And he would use his sense of history to remind us what the larger stakes are and to find a way out. And not just be

corrosively cynical or yammering away at how terrible things are, which is a lot of what the press does, but to also see a way out. To see that there are roads out of these difficult solutions, and we need to point them out. Not in a pedantic way, but in an illuminating way.

### **Meacham's capacity to work hard**

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EVAN THOMAS:

I've known a couple of truly great journalists, popular historians. Walter Isaacson and Jon Meacham, I worked closely with both of them, they're both my friends. They have a superhuman capacity to work, just beyond all of us. I mean, they can write books in the middle of the night. They can write books while they're juggling children and family obligations. They're not like the rest of us. You know, that famous line from Fitzgerald, "The rich are different from you and me?" Meacham is different from you and me, he can just do things that I can't and that you can't, and that other people just can't do. He just has a level of energy that is not normal. I don't think Jon sleeps much. I mean, I don't really know, but how could he? How do you get that much done and sleep? Also, this capacity to be on and to shift tracks. Jon is one of these great multitaskers who can shift from one subject to the next with absolute focus. I don't know how you jump from one horse to the other as you're charging across the prairie, but Jon can do it, and do it without complaint. I've tried to drag him into, for instance, commenting on a book I'm writing or a chapters. And without missing a beat he can enter my world, and with

complete acuity and complete concentration get right where I am from a standing start. I just don't know how the hell he does it. It's not normal, it is superhuman.

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Jon reminds me of some politicians that I've seen who have this natural energy. Bill Clinton drew power from adoration and from popular contact. I mean, when he came on a stage, his personality grew. When he walked into a crowd his personality grew. He became more charming, more dominant. Jon is a little bit the same way. I've watched Jon do three events in one day, breakfast, lunch, and almost dinner. And he grew in energy. Most people, the arc is down. With Jon it's up. He just can draw from crowds, he can see how much they adore him. They laugh at his jokes, the same jokes over and over again. But the laugh at them. And as a result, his jokes seem fresh. I've heard him say the same joke three times in one day, it's just as funny and natural and irreverent, and just fresh as it was... as it always is. That's a rare thing. How many people can do that? Great politicians can do it, great comedians can do it. Great performers can do it. Jon is a great politician, a great performer, he is all those things. If Jon wanted to run for office, god help him if he ever did and I don't think he ever will, but he would be fantastic because he has that Bill Clinton ability to suck energy from the people who are listening to him and not shrink but grow. Well people have approached him. I mean, he's certainly... People in Tennessee and elsewhere have said, "Hey Jon, you ought to run for some..." Because he'd be a natural. I know there's no such thing as a sure-fire politician, but he's got the gift, he's got the human

touch and he's got the idealism, and he's got the political skills, he can get along with people. He's a natural.

### **Meacham as a public figure and popular historian**

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EVAN THOMAS:

All popular historians subject themselves to the scrutiny of academics who are, some of them, jealous. And also, we do different things here. Real academics are great in the archives, and they go deep and they master the subject. Popular historians spend three or four years on a subject and then they move on. They don't go deep. They are not great archival geniuses. I mean, there's a lot of overlap for sure. But academics have reason to see themselves as being distinct, and in some ways better than journalists. And resent us a little bit for ripping them off or popularizing what they do. I get that, that's... Hey, that's human nature, it's the natural order of things. The truth is, the best...Jon, and Walter Isaacson's good about this and most of the good popular historians are very good at working with academics. Jon has a lot of friends, he has... there are some jealous academics but he makes friends in the academy, he works with them, he's respectful of them. This is true, certainly working on the Jefferson papers, and he's pretty good I think at being smart enough to make friends with academics, to say to them, "I need you. I need your help, I need your wisdom, and I need your experience." And to draw from that, and to be respectful about them and thank them, and to credit them.

### **Meacham's audience**

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EVAN THOMAS:

Well Jon's natural audience is people who are moderate and pretty well educated. He's going to reach them automatically. But I hope, and I would like to believe, that he's getting outside of that bubble. Because he is so good on TV, because he can present in large audiences, I hope and I think that he can reach young people who are suspicious of establishment people like me, who think that we're all sort of dead white males who are not quite dead yet—or a kind of conventional, retro, establishment figures—that Jon can transcend that, by his charm and his wisdom and his empathy. That he can reach people who might not otherwise listen to a moderate point of view. I think his book sales suggest that he is reaching those people. And he can take on large audiences and TV and radio and so forth, and podcasts, and I think reach them. And if not convert them, at least make them think twice about being dogmatic and judgmental.

### **How Meacham became friends with George H.W. Bush**

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EVAN THOMAS:

When George H. W. Bush was declaring for the presidency in 1987, the cover of Newsweek was called “Fighting the Wimp Factor.” And the cover story, which I edited, my name's not on it but I edited it, made Bush look wimpy.



And George Bush hated that, of course he did. It made his daughter cry, which nobody likes to see their daughter cry. And Jon Meacham was sort of confronted with this reality. President Bush used to refer to the ugly editors at Newsweek, meaning me and people like me. And Jon is so captivating that through our mutual friend Ann McDaniel, who was not an ugly editor, was taken at Kennebunkport and met President Bush. And Jon just won him over. Convinced him that he was not an ugly editor, that he was actually a fair minded, charming guy who was kind of like George H. W. Bush. And they became best friends.

### **Meacham's empathetic character**

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EVAN THOMAS:

I don't know how to do this in a way that isn't sappy, but Jon Meacham is a loving person. You know, he's a loving husband and father and all, he's a loving friend. I feel his love. I feel his... You know, I could be kind of... I feel his Christian love. But it's more than that, it's just human empathy. Jon is an empathetic person. You feel that. When you're in pain...Jon and I have been around the track a long time. We've been through a lot of tough situations, difficult stories, difficult personnel situations, difficult personal situations. I have always felt his love. He's a loving person. When you think about it, news magazines are institutions of the past—they are. But in their day, they were pretty prominent, and they're dealing with difficult situations, the Monica Lewinsky scandal, wars, elections. You're on a deadline. People get mad, they

get upset, they get scared. And Meacham through all of that conveyed to me a sense of understanding and empathy and kindness, and this sense of, look, we're all in this together. And it may seem dark and ugly at this moment, we're going to get through this. We're going to crack sardonic jokes and we're going to be anxious. But you know, we're going to get through this because we're in it together, we're friends. How bad can it be? It can be pretty bad, but we're going to get through it.