



A Conversation with Bart Casey



Five Questions and Answers about *The Vavasour Macbeth*

1. What inspired you to write *The Vavasour Macbeth*?

I was inspired by the story of Elizabethans Anne Vavasour and Sir Henry Lee.

I first met the couple when I was a graduate student looking into the curious theories concocted around the “Shakespeare Authorship Question.”

In particular, some very passionate people argue that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, actually wrote the works attributed to William Shakespeare. They’re even undismayed by the fact that he died several years before some of the bard’s best work.

However, while reading about Oxford, I stumbled onto the sad tale of his fling with a teenaged maid of honor named Anne Vavasour. The girl endured a spectacular fall from grace when she gave birth to a baby boy at court and seemed doomed to a miserably reduced life as an unwed mother -- until Sir Henry Lee came to her rescue.

Then the couple managed to live happily in love and luxury for more than 20 years, until Sir Henry died at almost 80 years old, and I knew their love story needed to be told.

And since they were together during the exact years when Shakespeare was writing, I added a Shakespearean connection to the story, so I could share some of the little known facts and problems about his writings.

2. What do you hope is the biggest takeaway from the book?

That “history” is not set in stone. It’s more alive than that.

For example, you’d think that every story worth telling about the Tudors has already been told – yet very few people have heard of Anne and Sir Henry.

And since Shakespeare has been studied and written about by a veritable army of sleuths and scholars, people may think that we know everything about him, too – but that’s just not the case.

Many of the things taught about Shakespeare in school are actually just guesses and theories. And many of those theories could be upended by a relatively minor discovery from the giant piles of unread Elizabethan papers sitting on the shelves of British stately homes and libraries like the UK National Archives in Kew.

3. Why do you feel that it's so important that Anne Vavasour's story gets told?

Well, now that we're living in the age of the "MeToo" movement, there's a growing sensitivity to the plight of women who have been taken advantage of by powerful men.

Anne Vavasour was a sixteen-year-old newcomer, carefully groomed and tutored from childhood to be a suitable companion to the queen in terms of education, poise, and personal refinements. Yet a married thirty-year-old sexual predator ruined all that, and uncaringly left her to be ridiculed as the delicious scandal of the season.

That should have finished Anne – but it did not. The widowed Sir Henry Lee clearly recognized she could be a loved and loving companion. And when the time was right, he invited her to become his life partner.

And to think that she became close friends with King James and his queen, Anne of Denmark, and later inherited Sir Henry's fortune just puts a wonderful finish on her comeback, don't you think?

4. There has recently been an increase in popularity in historical thrillers or dramas based on true events. In your opinion, why do you think that is?

I think many thrillers today are different from the classic Whodunits that successful writers like Agatha Christie created to entice readers to solve mysteries. Instead, they seem to take people on a journey – perhaps to a different country, culture, or time – offering an armchair travel adventure.

In *The Vavasour Macbeth* I offer readers an escape to England – both the modern-day world of London, the suburbs, Oxford and Stratford-upon-Avon as they all were around 1992 when I was there living and working, as well as some familiar English historical details from Tudor times – but hopefully with a few surprises.

5. What is one thing about Anne Vavasour and her story that is true, that people would think is fiction?

The true thing is that Anne would have been a highly educated, cultured, and accomplished young woman, and not some low-life harlot.

In her time, it would have been a major achievement to be accepted into the most intimate circle of the queen's attendants, just as the young Monica Lewinsky must have been one of our nation's best and brightest. How else could she have ever won a White House Internship?

Yet, as Julia Roberts's character in *Pretty Woman* says, "it's easier to believe the bad stuff." And that's a shame.