

Weaver, John Van Alstyne ^[1]

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by Richard Walser, 1996

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John Van Alstyne Weaver, writer, was born in [Charlotte](#) ^[2], the son of Annie Randolph Tate of Charlotte and John Van Alstyne Weaver, Sr., of New York State. Of Scottish, Irish, [Huguenot](#) ^[3], German, English, and Dutch ancestry, he and his brother Randolph were related to the Allison, Overman, and Graham families in North Carolina. Before his first birthday, he "was removed to Chicago," as he put it, and there his family became prominent in the social and literary circles of the city. In 1914 he was graduated from Hamilton College, where he was editor of the literary magazine and published poems and essays, one of them on O. Henry. For a year he attended George Pierce Baker's playwriting class at Harvard. Returning to Chicago, he prepared advertising copy for the *Chicago Daily News* and was assistant to the book editor. In 1917–19 he served in the army, where he was promoted from sergeant to lieutenant.

Weaver had been, he revealed, a "tea-hound in my youth," and the Jazz Age of the Twenties suited his style and personality. His first book of "shirt-sleeve poetry," *In American* ^[4] (1921), went through thirteen printings and made him a prominent figure. As one of the [Carl Sandburg](#) ^[5] and Ring Lardner school, he wrote in the dialect and vernacular of working people, of plumbers, clerks, soldiers, milkmen, shop girls, and taxi drivers. "I never write about anybody who makes over \$40 a week," he said, and in his use of the "American language," he was, H. L. Mencken believed, "the first poet, as far as I know, to attempt that operation." The popularity of *In American* led to five more books of poetry similar to it: *Finders* ^[6] (1923), *More in American* ^[7] (1926), *To Youth* ^[8] (1928), *Turning Point* ^[9] (1930), and the autobiographical *Trial Balance: A Sentimental Journey* ^[10] (1932). From 1920 to 1924 he was literary editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, then resigned to devote full time to writing.

His marriage to the celebrated actress Peggy Wood on 14 Feb. 1924 was a happy and lasting one, and he was devoted to his son David and to his farm in Stamford, Conn. Frequently he returned to North Carolina to visit relatives. In 1926 he collaborated with the established playwright [George Abbott](#) ^[11] on a comedy *Love 'Em and Leave 'Em* ^[12], which had a successful Broadway run. In 1926–28 he was drama critic for *College Humor*. Of his three novels—*Margey Wins the Game* ^[13] (1922), *Her Knight Comes Riding* ^[14] (1928), and *Joy-Girl* ^[15] (1932)—the most widely read was the second, about a Brooklyn stenographer's search for a dream-hero. In 1928 he made his first trip to Hollywood and after 1931 spent long periods there writing dialogue for motion pictures. Original scripts for Clara Bow and an adaptation of *Tom Sawyer* ^[16] were his principal accomplishments. Meanwhile he appeared on the lecture platform throughout the United States and contributed poems, short stories, and articles to magazines. After becoming ill in Hollywood with tuberculosis, he was sent to Colorado Springs, where he died several months later. Weaver was a Congregationalist. *In American: The Collection Poems* ^[17] (1939) had a foreword by the approving H. L. Mencken.

References:

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Additional Resources:

"Weaver, John Van Alstyne 1893-1938." WorldCat.org: The World's Largest Library Catalog. <https://www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n81-42612> ^[18] (ccessed March 19, 2013).

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