

JUNE 2022

B&P

Books 'N Pieces Magazine
HELPING NEW WRITERS GET PUBLISHED BOOKSNPIECES.COM

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SINCE 2017

Books 'N Pieces Magazine is published monthly by William Gensburger/Misterwriter Publications, available in print and digital formats, and distributed through opt-in email lists, subscribers, as well as placement on websites with high traffic, social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, Tik-Tok, Instagram and BooksNPieces.com with an estimated readership of 25,000. It is FREE to read the digital editions of Books 'N Pieces Magazine. Print copies are available through Amazon.com. We are supported through advertising revenue, affiliate links, as well as donations made by readers without obligation. For ad and services rates, please contact the publisher. Ph: (208) 991-2626

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Old Man on the Park Bench

by Mark Tulin

Sometimes life offers you an unexpected way forward.

While I sat on a bench at Oak Park, an older man shuffled his walker toward me. “Do you mind if I share the sunlight with you?” he asked in a gravelly voice.

“No worries,” I smiled, welcoming the company.

I’ve learned to say no worries a lot. It’s a mindset here in Santa Barbara. If you say no worries, it seems like your problems disappear or get minimized no matter what ugly situation you face.

The man was eager to talk, and I thought it would be a friendly distraction from the negative thoughts that ran through my mind like a ticker tape.

“My name is Logan,” he said and extended his frail, bony hand with yellowing fingernails.

“Aaron,” I responded, wrapping his cold hand in mine for a moment.

Logan wore outdated Madras Shorts revealing a pair of spindly, hairless legs. The veins of his arms protruded like bluish snakes. His mouth was dry and lips cracked, and he kept wetting his lips with his tongue with each raspy inhale.

My gut told me that he was not long for this earth. His face and body were wasting away, and his breathing was so labored that tears formed in his eyes. He seemed to be hanging on by a thread.

Despite his difficulty in breathing, he still wanted to engage in conversation. He told me he came out of Cottage Hospital a few days ago, recovering from double pneumonia. His doctor told him to get plenty of sunshine and fresh air so his compromised lungs could heal faster. I told Logan that I was in the park to heal also. But it wasn’t my body I was trying to

restore, but my soul.

“Please,” he said, “I want to apologize beforehand for my embarrassing coughing spells. They’re disgusting, I know, but I can’t help it.”

Again, I said, “No worries.” Almost as a reflex to other people’s pain.

He took out a colored hanky and coughed into it. It was a wet, deep cough that rattled his frail bones and made his head tremble.

“Go ahead and do what you have to do,” I said. “It doesn’t bother me. When I was a college student, I worked in a nursing home for a summer and saw all kinds of stuff.”

“You know you have a problem when you see the red smudge in your tissue,” he shared. “It hits you like a bullet to the gut.”

I nodded my head, indicating that I knew what he meant. My wife left me a few

years ago, and I thought I'd never recover. Our marriage wasn't great, but she didn't tell me it was over until I found her closet empty after work. She left me a note and said she had met somebody else and apologized for the abruptness.

"You could deny many things in life, but when you're coughing up blood, you can't deny something that serious."

"You'll get better," I said while the California sunshine warmed our faces.

I looked up at an agitated crow cawing wildly. I heard the Spanish voices in the distance. There was laughter.

"Beautiful day," I turned to the elderly man.

He nodded. "Every day is beautiful here."

"I wish it would rain, though," I added. "With the drought and everything being so dry, the Santa Ana winds could kick up and start a big wildfire."

He sympathized with my concern and coughed some more. The last cough appeared to be particularly excruciating, shaking his arms violently to the point of falling off the bench and landing on a knee. I helped him back up and moved his walker close to

him.

"If you cough again, hang on to this, so you don't fall."

"When something takes over an important organ of your body," he said, "you have no choice but to succumb to it. Sometimes medications don't work no matter how many you take. The disease I have is too powerful for my immune system. I have no choice but to let things happen as they will."

I felt old, too, not in years but in worry. I was barely thirty-eight and had nothing physically wrong with me. The months I spent in Santa Barbara seemed to have aged me quicker than people staying in the sun too long.

I looked up at the bright yellow sphere in the cloudless, blue sky. Despite being unemployed, I was happy to be in California, where the weather was temperate and, most days, picture-perfect. I still hoped I could make it here, but my money was slowly dwindling. To say that being broke and homeless scared the hell out of me, would be a gross understatement.

"How long have you lived in Santa Barbara?" Logan asked.

"Nine months," I said.

When I told him I was from Pittsburgh, he smiled.

"I know Pittsburgh well. A wonderful old steel town with plenty of down-to-earth people and yummy comfort food. I used to consult with a publishing company downtown twice a year. I enjoyed the music and the culture on those trips and got to see a couple of Steeler games as well."

The man seemed to have more energy, more animation in his movements when he spoke of his visits to Pittsburgh. Thinking of the city, and a beer called Iron City, seemed to take him back to a happier time when he was a robust young man.

The next moment, he coughed again. He checked his hanky and looked up. "No blood this time," he said with a wide grin as if it were a significant achievement. He gave his nose a long blow for good measure.

For a moment, the feeble man looked at me with sadness in his watery eyes. He told me he had cancer, was getting chemo treatments every other week, and had to wear a colostomy bag on top of everything else. I felt like a

priest receiving confession.

“It’s hard for me to sleep at night,” he said. “I keep hearing my lungs rattle and feel the phlegm bubble up into my throat, choking my breath. Don’t get old, young man. Old age is absolute torture. Perhaps, God tortures us before the great reprieve in the sky.”

He talked about his ailments like they were people. He didn’t have anything left that he valued in his life except for his house and his favorite park bench in Oak Park.

“My wife died ten years ago with a rare blood disorder that caught her by surprise,” he said. “We never had children, although we were quite happy without them. I don’t have any friends left, either. My brother and sister went caput not too long ago. And the Springer Spaniel I had for twenty years died six months ago.”

Our attention turned to a homeless couple washing up at an outdoor sink. The couple disrobed and scrubbed each other with washcloths, ensuring they got every nook and cranny. They tried to hide their nakedness behind a stone barrier, but I could see

their bare backs glistening in the bright sunlight. It seemed odd for me to say how beautiful they looked without clothes, but that’s how I perceived them.

“Life is terrible for everyone,” Logan said, noticing the homeless couple bathe outdoors. “Sometimes, we don’t control how things turn out, despite having good intentions and avoiding trouble as best as we can.”

“That’s true,” I said. “I worked for the same company for over twelve years believing that the legal department would never downsize. I was wrong. Collect your belongings, the supervisor said without compassion, and I was out the door before lunchtime. No warm goodbyes or any suggestions on how to find another job. They thought that giving me severance pay would be all I needed.”

Logan shook his head and patted me on the shoulder. Then he coughed a few more times.

“Do you need help?” I asked

“Pneumonia speaks to me often, Aaron—it has a voice, you know. It tells me to slow down. It tells me to take

care of myself or else I won’t have a body left. Life is so temporary, Aaron. It breaks my heart. Our next breath could be our last, so we might as well make the best out of every single moment.”

The homeless couple looked up and caught me staring. I wondered if the couple felt ashamed to be homeless and afraid that I was being judgmental, which would be the last thing I would do.

It could be me bathing there one day, looking paranoid and insecure. I can’t sleep some nights because I have nightmares about being homeless, living on the streets, sleeping in the park, or under a bridge. If I don’t find a job soon, I will be destitute. It’s not cheap here. My bank account keeps shrinking, and I get closer to living on the streets every day.

When I was in Pittsburgh, I never had any doubts. I had a good job, a wife, and security. I never expected to wake up one day alone in a single bed without work. The crows wake me up every morning. I get up, get dressed, look in the newspapers and online for jobs, then come to the

park and feel that the world is passing me by.

The homeless couple dried-off took turns combing each other's hair, and wrung out their wet clothes. They spoke in whispers during this entire process. They were attentive to every little detail. They packed their bags slowly in a systematic way that, I'm sure, they've done a thousand times. Their lives seemed to be in constant motion, with no time to stand still or relax. Their home was everywhere, and it was constantly changing.

"I don't know how they can live like that," I said to Logan.

"They probably used to it. You get used to everything."

"But how do you get used to living in so much discomfort and humiliation?"

"I don't know?" and he held up his hands.

"I don't mean to bum you out, Logan."

"Don't worry, Aaron. I just like your company. Say whatever you want. Talking is free."

I took him up on that offer.

"It's funny how things work out, Logan. A short time ago, I was in Pittsburgh dreaming of a wonderful life in California. I

wanted to start over, recreate myself— forget all the mistakes I made. Here I am now sitting in paradise and still unemployed."

Logan gave me a knowing grin and promised that things would get better.

The homeless couple loaded their backpacks on their shoulders. Each one made sure that the other's bag was secure and that they didn't forget anything before setting off on their arduous journey.

Logan saw me staring and removed five dollars from his pocket. "Here, give to this couple before they leave. Hurry! They walk fast."

Logan was right. They moved quickly, and I had to jog to catch up with them.

"Excuse me. This is from the old man on the bench. He wants you to have it."

It was like I gave them a million dollars. They were so happy. They couldn't stop thanking me. "God bless you," the man said, and the woman smiled.

"Where do you stay?" I asked.

"On the other side of the park," he said. "Past the dried-up stream."

"I looked and saw a small

homeless encampment beside a park bench."

"Is that your tent?"

"Sure is."

"If it's none of my business— just say so. But how did you become homeless?"

The woman said she was a school teacher, and one of her students spread lies about her, and she was fired. And her husband had been addicted to drugs and went to prison for drug dealing.

"That's a shame," I said. "Did you ever try the homeless shelter?"

"It's too dirty," said the man. "And it's not safe for women. We stayed there for a month and decided it wasn't for us."

"My name is Aaron," I said.

"This is Sally, and I'm Joseph."

"Okay, Sally and Joseph. Don't let me keep you. Hope you have a good day."

"Yeah," they said. "See you around."

When I got back, Logan was getting ready to leave. He buttoned his sweater, straightened his baseball cap, and had his hands on the walker.

"I'm getting hungry," said Logan, feeling his belly growl. "How about some tomato

soup and grilled cheese for lunch? I've got everything in the cupboard just waiting for us."

"That sounds great," I said without hesitation.

I helped Logan up from the bench and got him stabilized with his walker. He pointed to his house, a cute little yellow and white bungalow across from the park.

I stood by his side as he shuffled unsteadily along the narrow walkway to his home. The outside of the bungalow had been neglected with overgrown bushes, fallen tree branches, and scattered piles of leaves and tree nuts.

"I'm glad to be home," Logan said, opening the squeaky screen door. "I don't think I would have made it to my house without your strong presence. Give me some time to catch my breath, please."

He leaned over and took two squirts of his yellow inhaler, paused for a few moments against the door frame, and eventually was able to resume normal breathing.

"Aaron," he said once in his house. "I have a proposition for you."

"What's that?" I asked

curiously.

"How would you like to be my assistant? As you can see, I sure could use your help—and since you need a job—whaddya say? It would be temporary, of course. Just until you find something better."

I smiled, surprised by his kindness and the opportunity.

"Sure," I said with much gratitude.

"Twenty-five an hour, if that's okay with you?" Logan smiled. "I made a lot of money in my life so I could afford it."

"When do I start?" I asked, eagerly.

"You already did," he said as he began to settle into his brown-leather recliner. He moved the walker to the side of his chair, slipped off his loafers, and propped his old and tired bare feet onto an ottoman. He reached for the remote control on the armrest and switched stations a few times before finally settling on his favorite news station.

I went to the kitchen, which I wasn't surprised was very disorganized. It took a few minutes to get my bearings straight, then I opened up a can of Progresso tomato soup and poured it into a medium saucepan. I found

where the white bread was stored and made a couple of golden-brown grilled cheese sandwiches. I looked out the kitchen window as I let the soup cool a bit and could see our bench at Oak Park from there. The sun was still shining. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark Tulin is a published author of humor, short stories, and poetry. He is a Pushcart

nominee and Best of Drabble.

*He has authored *Magical Yogis* (Prolific Press, 2017), *Awkward Grace* (Kelsay Books, 2019), *The Asthmatic Kid and Other Stories* (Madville Publishing, 2020), *Junkyard Souls* (Alien Buddha Press, 2021), and *Rain on Cabrillo* (Cyberwit, 2021).*

*These books are available on Amazon Prime as well as the publishers. Mark has also been featured in *Vita Brevis Press*, *Amethyst Review*, *Ariel Chart*, *Fiction on the Web*, *The Opiate*, and many others.*

Mark lives in Palm Springs, California with his wife Alice.

His website: <https://www.crownthewire.com>

Twitter: @Crow_writer, and Instagram: @Crownthewirepoetry.

437 WILTON STREET

(A Brick Story)

by Zach Murphy

They say you can't go home again.
Are they correct?

Charlie's wistful heart tingles as he pulls up to 437 Wilton Street, the apartment building from his childhood. You can board up the windows, but you can't cross out the souls that once occupied the walls. Everything is gone but the skeleton of a structure and the echoes of Charlie's memories.

The entire block would light up with a Fourth of July jubilation every Saturday night. Dueling music speakers would battle to steal the humid air at full volume. The Ramones shouted to the rooftop. Bruce Springsteen crooned to the moon. And Sam Cooke sang to the heavens.

Out in the street, Rich used to show off his candy red Mustang. Rich thought he was a lot cooler than he was. His hair grease looked like a mixture of egg yolks and cement. Charlie hasn't forgotten

the time that Rich revved up his ride in front of the whole neighborhood, only to blow the engine. As everybody laughed, Rich's face blushed

spoke through the television. It was a commercial for a landscaping business aptly named Shawn's Professional Landscaping.



redder than his broken car.

Shawn was the tallest human that Charlie had ever seen. He dribbled the basketball on the bubblegum-stained concrete like he had the world in his hands. He never did make it to the pros, though, but he did become a pro of another kind. Charlie hadn't heard about Shawn in years until the day a familiar voice

Charlie wished that he were older. Then, maybe he might've gotten noticed by his first crush, Henrietta. He'd often daydream about her curly hair, sparkly lip gloss, and mysterious eyes. Sometimes when Charlie passed by her door, he'd hear loud yelling and harsh banging. Wherever she was now, he hoped she was safe and happy.

TJ always treated Charlie like a little brother. He'd even give him extra cash for snacks every single week. Charlie always admired TJ's bright red Nike shoes. One day, TJ got arrested by the cops in front of Charlie's very own eyes. It turned out that TJ was selling a certain kind of product, and it wasn't chocolates.

Charlie's grandma cooked the most delicious spaghetti. It smelled like love. The sauce was made from fresh tomatoes that she grew on the building's rooftop. Charlie still thinks of her sweet smile with the missing front tooth,

and the big, dark moles on her cheeks. The cancer eventually got to her. When she was put to rest, Charlie was forced to go to a new home. But it wasn't a home. The memories from that place are the ones that Charlie permanently boarded up in his mind.

After coming out of his trance, Charlie picked up a decrepit brown brick from the building and set it on the passenger side floor of his pristine Cadillac. When he arrives back at his quaint house in a quiet neighborhood, he places the brick in the soil of his tomato garden and smiles. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in *Reed Magazine*,

The Coachella Review, *Maudlin House*, *B O D Y*, *Ruminate*, and *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*. His chapbook *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press) is available in paperback and e-book. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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THE BOY AND THE WHALE

by David Bassano

Starting a new job, a young man discovers all is not as it seems.

“It’s okay to carry metal into the building,” said Father. “Just make sure you leave every last bit in the locker room.”

“Okay,” said Trevor.

Mother finished packing their lunches into cylindrical metal canisters in the kitchen, her morning ritual for many years. She came out to the parlor and placed the canisters, one new and one old and dented, on the end table by the stairs. The news was playing on the screen, but the sound was turned down.

Mother stepped in front of her son and examined him minutely. He looked like a young, strong version of her husband, like when they’d met. She was trying not to cry.

“I’m so proud of you!” she said.

Standing just behind him, Trevor’s father smiled and suppressed his tears.

Trevor squirmed uncomfortably as his mother adjusted his shirt, pulling his collar

straight. He didn’t want to stomp on her happiness, so he endured it. He thought, I wonder how old a woman needs to be before she dotes like this. The younger women didn’t seem to do it very much.

“Thanks, Ma.”

“Now, do your best,” she said. “Don’t let your family down.”

“I won’t, Ma.”

“He’ll be fine,” said Father, looking at his old watch.

The men took up the lunch canisters, slung them over their shoulders by the canvas straps, opened the front door, and fearlessly stepped into the mid-21st century.

“I’ll have a pot roast waiting for you when you get home!” Mother called out the front door.

“Thanks, Ma!” said two generations of men over their shoulders.

The men walked silently through the city streets, lunches a-swing at their sides. Their tiny neighborhood, only a few

blocks deep, was an old-fashioned suburb, with front and back yards and garages alongside two-story homes. However, walk a kilometer in any direction, and the landscape changes drastically. To the west lay the gated communities of the chipheads, and to the east sprawled the choking downtown.

The two men continued three blocks to a bus stop, barely caught the next intra-city bus, and rode a few minutes to the subway, where the buildings and streets grew ragged like old clothes or untended gardens. The subway was packed, as it was every morning. Then they took the subway east to the industrial district on the river.

After a lurching ride, they ascended into the tepid light of downtown. The sidewalks were eroding and fringed with trash, the streets filled with rush hour traffic, with a haze of mild poison hanging over the cars. The men walked sin-

gle-file through the crowd. Everyone stared straight ahead or spoke quietly into the air in mobile conversations, many of them wearing gas masks if they could afford them. The buildings blocked the sunlight except at intersections. The concrete seemed to be slowly melting, falling in small pieces onto the sidewalks like ancient ruins decaying, softening the hard edges.

They saw a limousine go by at the intersection as a corporate helicopter beat the air overhead, streaking downtown.

Bastards, thought Trevor. Well, screw 'em. They can't touch me anymore. He pulled his posture straight and strode with more tremendous energy.

The chipheads called all the rest "cavemen," those who didn't have implants, who couldn't afford them, those frozen at an earlier stage of evolution. The microchips implanted under the skull, hardwired to the frontal lobes, converted a person into a superbeing, claimed the advertisements. Thirty years hence, engineers cracked nature's code by creating a seamless interface between the brain's neurological communication and the

microprocessor, permitting perfect brain-computer interaction. It allowed for recording and recall experiences, instant complex calculations, and sat-link access to databases, spreadsheets, and even the Internet. All the information is experienced as pure knowledge as if the user had always known these things. It produced workers able to mesh with mainframes, with each other, with the entire organization, at the speed of thought and with perfect accuracy. And those who could not afford the expensive procedure quickly learned that the world quietly, guiltlessly, discarded them. Of course, the corporations only wanted the most efficient worker in this highly-competitive world. Efficiency is the driver of progress; who would dare argue? HR departments wanted to know what RAM was under your skull and what OS your brain was running. There were court cases over employment discrimination, about what you could ask, but everyone knew it was obvious. What is twenty-two thousand, four hundred forty-seven point oh-two times four to the twenty-seventh power and one-third? Anyone who couldn't

answer immediately was out, Curriculum Vitae and their dreams deleted.

The line between the larger lower and shrinking middle classes was indelibly defined by technology. Without the money for the implant, one could never make the money needed to get the implant. The division between chipheads and cavemen was practically permanent. And to be a caveman in the mid-21st century was a difficult and monotonous sentence to bear. Nature was angry at man and reminded him daily. The summers grew unbearably hot, killing the weak and poor, and the storms fiercer, lashing the coasts like elemental demons. Crops failed, and forests were devoured by pests. Food and rent steadily grew more expensive, and the cavemen saw their employment options whither as machines or chipheads replaced them. You were either in or out, and it wasn't good to be out.

Father and son went through the factory gates, and Trevor presented his security ID for the first time. A few chipheads came through in their suits, but most drove through a different gate in expensive cars.

None of them entered the double doors that Trevor and his father now used. Other people in street clothes joined them. They walked together through the gray halls, company notices and labor laws adorning the walls, to a crowded locker room. Trevor found his locker, his name label pristine on the metal door; he removed his crisp new uniform while dozens of other men did the same with much chatter. The uniform was cobalt blue, with gold stripes down the arms and legs, with Trevor's name on the chest above the golden, sun-like corporate logo. The black work boots had plastic eyelets and a thick plastic toe cap, his belt a plastic buckle. He left everything else in the locker. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Bassano is a History professor at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey. He is also a human rights activist, an

author of academic and literary works, and an avid hiker and cyclist. Trevelyan's Wager, published by Harvard Square Editions, is his first novel.

You may learn more about him and his work at: <https://www.facebook.com/davidbassanoauthor/>

SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNERS ARE...



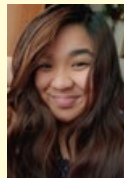
We received over 150 entries, and our judges selected these three winners. Books & Pieces Magazine congratulates them. Their stories will be published in the July issue.

FIRST PLACE WINNER:



DANIEL JACKSON Story title: 'Awakening'
Daniel Jackson is an aspiring writer from Newport, Rhode Island, striving to create new and exciting works of fiction. He graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering and works as an environmental scientist in the Pacific Northwest. He can be found exploring the pacific coast or wandering through the mountains, finding inspiration for his work through his adventures. He lives in Portland, Oregon with his soon-to-be wife.

SECOND PLACE WINNER:



KATHERINE SORIANO Story title: 'A Return to Romance'
Katherine Soriano was born and raised in the San Francisco bay Area. She got her B.S. In mathematics and Economics from Uc San Diego. A homebody through and through, she would rather spend her time searching the web for fanfiction. Sometimes, she will leave the comfort of her home to hang out with her extensive Filipino family. Writing will always be her first love. She now lives with her boyfriend, dog, and cat in the 925 area. You can follow her on Instagram @ howveryoriginal

THIRD PLACE WINNER:



MAGGIE NERZ IRIBARNE

Story title: 'My Father the Principal'
Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 52, living her writing dream in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. She writes about teenagers, witches, the very old, bats, cats, priests/nuns, cleaning ladies, runaways, struggling teachers, and neighborhood ghosts, among many other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

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OUT OF HIS LEAGUE

by Gerry Coleman

What happens when Billy Olsen falls for a girl 'out of his league'?

"Love is a zero-sum game.
Pretty much."
— Billy Olsen

Billy behaved oddly when he saw her, like a Cubist painting tumbling down a staircase.

It was Tuesday evening. The Parrot Lounge's sole décor statement was a stuffed parrot in a cage hanging from the ceiling below a light bulb in blueish cigarette smoke. It was not the place to take a date nor find a snug corner to brood in—too much light, too loud, substandard bar food, and flat pitchers of beer.

The Parrot stuck to the working class, backstreet tradition for sideways mobile singles, and the struggling college crowd. People hung out with friends, and some pushed tables together. Sixties folksy pop music was on the jukebox: Simon and Garfunkel, Dylan, Jefferson Airplane, The Doors. It was a hangout to waste a few hours and punch in another day toward

the weekend. Weekday nights were about nothing—talking, listening to music, leaving early, getting up for school, or a boring office job.

The neighborhood was not the best. On the haggard verges of the city, the commute into Manhattan was an hour, and the city skyline was beyond view even on clear nights. You couldn't see the Statue of Liberty if you knew where it was. The district was losing a bout of gentrification to pseudo-sophisticated eateries and bullshit woody pubs with cheap gas fireplaces named after romantic, mystical things: The Salmon of Truth, The Silver Apples of The Moon, and Where The Water Lilies Grow.

The beer-and-ball gin mills known by family names and the old ethnic associations were being sold off by grandchildren and banks in receivership to real estate companies. Phony Northern Italian affairs were likewise replacing longstanding, family-run

Italiano restaurants with valet parking, frozen butter patties in cardboard squares, and tiny porcelain spoons for The Parmigiana in white cups with lids. The Villa Bellini had a dwarf dressed as a gentleman on a gin bottle at the door.

Billy Olsen looked at her through a three-ringed pretzel as she sat with her girlfriends. He had been looking at her for weeks. She was pretty and on the quiet side. She fiddled with the fringes at the end of a red bandito-looking serape that she wore. Her chestnut brown eyes highlighted by coral shadows of teal and cobalt blue under black penciled eyebrows. She was perfect. Maybe a little too perfect.

He considered the salt crystals on the pretzel. Janis Joplin complained about something in the background—Awah, Awah, Awah—while his friends discussed how the Mets sucked. Each salt crystal was a tiny, white marbled geometric fragment

that glowed dully from inside when angled in the artificial light. He wondered how it worked, getting the salt on the pretzel distributed evenly across the circumference of the rings. It was as though little workers attached each crystal separately—inter-twined, salted infinity loops tied in a bow.

Billy went incognito against a side window to cover a better view of the girl. He placed his glass on the sill and turned red next to the Rheingold Extra Dry sign. After staring at her long enough to get caught, he went to the bar for another pitcher. His friends, Eddie and Richie, presented their glasses like nestlings when he returned.

Eddie was on about how the Mets sucked. Billy Olsen conceded the Mets were not good, but as much ironically as literally. Janis absorbed his bluesy mood whenever he played her on the jukebox, so he fed it coins to match the girl.

She and her friends came every Tuesday night and always sat in the same chairs at the same table. Always she listened patiently, attendant to her girlfriends—her smile fixed

during humorous stories or frowning thoughtfully throughout if sad. Her comments were introduced by disclaimers and facial modifiers she tilted into when she spoke.

“I don’t know, perhaps . . . I guess, I think . . .”

She felt out of place. Billy found that sweet. Perhaps she was out of place. Sometimes she would rustle for a moment, then reconnect with her friends. She had an extra pair of incisors on the top row that picked up smudges of bright red or pink lipstick. But the quality that leaped out, that was beyond interpretation—she was in a fashion universe of her own.

The Parrot was filled with people in jeans, t-shirts, or sweaters, while she tried out an imitation Tang Dynasty Retro with flowing dragon sleeves for the first cool Tuesday night of autumn.

One week she wore a roaring twenties flapper dress with a long stole across and down her shoulders and arms, and a rakish tilted Gatsby hat on top. The next time, she arrived in a bright, curtain-like Indian sari. Diaphanous like see-through clouds.

She was out of his league.

It was important to be in his league. Girls a too tall or too short, or too this or that, were in his plans because he was a little too himself. Shoot too high, and he was looking for trouble down the road. Go low; he already lost. Since his teenage years, he was more comfortable when he, and his dates, were more comfortable—in the same league.

He had dates with girls with acne, for example, who applied foundation make-up that would not necessarily match their natural facial coloration or texture. By the time they were back at the girl’s door at the end of the evening, her face would have cracks like desert sands. But suppose, just before he kissed her, the girl nudged forward a little teddy bear tongue from between her lips, ever so slightly. What pimples? Suppose she lifted her shoulder tips and tilted her face to await Billy’s first embrace. He would be glad to accommodate the inconvenience of the blemishes and the flaking make-up if the girl was that nice.

Being in his league was a

series of compromises and offsetting compensations, but he was hardly perfect. The girls on the receiving end performed the same asset-to-liabilities assessments. His hair was thinning at age twenty-one. He frequently suffered cognitive fogginess when anxious and was prone to childishly impish mood swings.

One Tuesday night in steady snow in deepest winter, while Richie explained how his Army Reserve meeting went, Billy Olsen took a flat beer to his spot by the bar's only window. The sill was a death destination for leafy, formerly flying insect carcasses to pile up for The Parrot's weekly sweep-up. He made a porthole with the heel of his palm in the condensation and squinted through the aperture into the unnatural neon redness. He looked through a life-sized reflection of his eye, which appeared in the storm outside the window, and imagined pigeons puffed along the cliff ledges of the apartments above the avenue. Snow curled around and into the hidden crevices and rims. The headlights of a black sedan doing eight miles-per-hour down the middle of the road

made the snow whiter, fall thicker, and more severely angled in front of it. Its ice-thickened windshield wipers thumped to the ghost-wagon jangle of snow chains long after the car disappeared into the storm.

Billy checked the girl out through a pretzel ring to see what she was wearing when she appeared in the middle of a loop.

He made "Hi" with his lips. She made "Hi" back. He smiled. She looked away. When he least expected it, he was in front of her. She was alone at her table. Perhaps that was why he got up.

"Hi. Sorry for snooping on you through the pretzel. Your outfit is very nice. What is it, a poncho?"

"I guess it's a poncho. Or a wrap, perhaps."

"Sorry." He offered her his hand. "I'm Billy Olsen."

Her left hand offered up from under her wrap.

"Hello Billy Olsen. I am Gabriella."

They talked about ponchos and wraps and sun colors, things Billy knew nothing about. When her girlfriends came back, he returned to his table. Before leaving for

the night, he looked for her through a pretzel to say "Bye," but she was already gone.

The following Tuesday, taking the great circle route to the bar with apparent nonchalance around her table, he said, "Hey, Gabriella. Nice cape, I think?"

"A cape. Maybe a blanket."

"I believe it's a cape."

"Could be."

It was a blanket, Lakota Sioux in design. A star quilt with bright reds, yellows, and oranges clipped with a clasp to hold it together, crafted with her head in the middle.

Taking Billy's lead, the guys, without being asked, carried their chairs to encamp at the girls' table in a coordinated, peaceful occupation. They mostly had girlfriends, but it was not that kind of move. The Parrot was not that kind of place. The Parrot wasn't particularly any kind of place. A random conversation sparked around the table. People knew other people who knew someone else. This and that. Billy kept an eye on Gabriella, even though she was out of his league, even though he didn't expect a promotion any time soon.

Richie lit a joint. Teddy and Sal were behind the bar. They were cool. Richie was cool. He took a toke and backhanded it waist high under the table to the girl to his left. The joint passed cupped by the giver to the receiver to preserve the spark around the table. It was accepted to gift to the next. Some declined, no offense, passing it on by the wettened tip. Others made it glow red in the grottoes of their palms. Peace be with you. When it came to Billy, he took a draw, hoping not to fall into a coughing fit, which he did. Gabriella's left hand came from under her Lakota blanket to rescue it into a lingering pull, passing her bright red lips and extra teeth into her lungs, which she held.

Richie drove some of them home in his father's 1960 Lark. Billy Olsen and Gabriella piled into the backseat with a girlfriend in between. He tried to make eye contact, but Gabriella was happy to be the center of his attention from a safe distance. John Lennon and The Plastic Ono Band joined them, jacked loud by Richie, who swayed with the wheel, and they all sang and swayed like the moon, the

sun, and the stars along Third Avenue onto Ninety-Seventh Street and along Marine Boulevard.

Brownstones and row houses with stone stairs like miniature inner-city Aztec temples stood shoulder to shoulder on side streets so as to share laughter, nightmares, radio shows, and screams of love and anger. Constructed of sandstone extruded from condensed rock 250 million years old, the houses themselves had been built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. On top of the stoops were concrete lion planters with one geranium apiece that smelled like cat pee, depending on the season, with a family living in the basement with a worm-eye view of the trash cans.

Billy Olsen tried to close in on Gabriella around the immensity of her girlfriend's overcoat; she continued to sway on and on, on and on with John and Yoko. He worked himself close enough to bombard Gabriella with battalions of photons shooting from his eyes, which he was unaware did not work that way, but so it felt to him, and so it felt to her.

His eyes were a deep, bland gray, like the Brooklyn night sky in the clouds above the streetlights. The Verrazano Bridge's red warning lights blinked against the sea fog leading cars and trucks over the black waters of The Narrows out of the city into the rest of America and vice versa.

The girl's coat parted enough to allow him to touch Gabriella's shoulder with his forearm. Billy Olsen was closer to her girlfriend's head than to Gabriella when he said, "Tell me a story about you."

He had waited way too long to ask her something meaningful.

"Please. You could make it up, and I promise to believe you."

"I don't have a story. At least I can't think of one."

It was like her to say that.

"I can't think of a story about me either." This was a lie.

So, he told her how he went to Newark to visit Stephen Crane's grave. His arm was now on the back of the seat over her shoulder. He told her how the rain whipped into his face, how he knew Crane's

poems. They were short, and there weren't many, and he recited a few standing over what was left of Crane underground.

One poem he repeated to her was about a man who ate his heart because it was his heart.

And another about a man ready to leap to his death in the arms of his love:

“. . . If thou and thy white arms were there, / And the fall to doom a long way.”

Billy Olsen didn't realize how 19th-century proper and corny this sounded to her. He meant for it to refer to her.

“Just me and Crane,” he said. “The rain turned to snow crusting my head and shoulders and Crane's grave white.”

Also, a lie.

Her drawn eyeliner, black and perfectly curved, pushed into her forehead as she sat silently. Her eyelashes fluttered in the car window as she watched Brooklyn fly by—lashes designed to slice a young man's heart.

They drove between four cauldrons of sewer gas at the intersection near where the girls lived. Richie pulled up in front of their apartment

building and turned to the backseat; his arm incidentally dropped over the girl next to him.

“Here we are. Out you go.”

Out they were. Billy had a long hike home in the storm. He had a brief chat with Gabriella, while her girlfriend fled in her overcoat into their building.

“Maybe see you next week?” he asked.

Her hair was parted perfectly down the middle and combed to slide alternatively from one side of her face to reveal the other if she tilted, which she did. Billy got the impression she wanted him to come upstairs. He followed her in. They no longer thought about what either meant when they were alone in the elevator.

The apartment door was ajar when they got to her floor. *California Dreaming* drifted from her girlfriend's room.

They sat on the sofa. Gabriella unfastened the clasp of her Lakota blanket to reveal an embroidered, carnelian-red percale blouse.

Her right arm was willowy and handless, like the bud of an un-blossomed flower. Gabriella touched Billy's cheek.

She had beautiful eyes. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerry Coleman was born and raised in Brooklyn, New Jersey. He

graduated from Saint Peter's College in 1966 and did his graduate work at Wagner College and Columbia University through the mid-1970s. He taught writing and literature at Union County College in New Jersey for almost forty years.

Since retiring to Dunedin, Florida, he helps organize and run writing workshops for WordSmitten Media in St. Petersburg, Fla., works with the Chair of The Authors Guild [Florida Chapter] put together meetings and events, and consults with writers on their full-length book projects.

He is currently working on a collection of short fiction set in Vietnam era Brooklyn.



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Nicole Fanning

~The Power of Cellphone Writing~

Nicole Fanning is an author, copywriter, wife and super proud dog mom to three rambunctious rescue dogs.

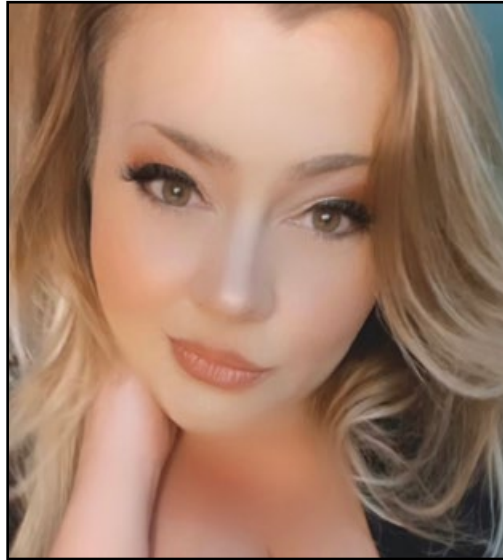
She considers herself an old school romantic, with a proclivity for a little mischief.

With a background in marketing, and Human Resources, she's found that the human element is by far the most colorful, complex and most interesting in the world.

As I child, she says she devoured every book she could find, and spent her free time writing fictional short-stories to share with friends.

Was that the reason she decided to write her first novel?

Q: You've got two novels out, 'Catalyst,' and 'Ignite,' with a third 'Flash Point'



coming out this year. Your 'Heart of the Inferno' Series.' And you've said there would be 14 novels in the series. How do you know this far ahead of time, or have you plotted out all of them already?

Before I allowed myself to write a single sentence of Catalyst, I mapped out the entire plot for all fourteen books in what I call my "Plot Skeleton." These fourteen books will make up our Mafiaverse,

and they will cover the four main books in the Heart of the Inferno Series, as well as prequels, sequels, and a handful of smaller novellas!

Q: You describe yourself as obsessed with Mafia-like scenarios and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. And your current series seems to be along the lines of a Mafia romance? Is this correct, and what draws you to that genre?

I would call it a Mafia Thriller-Romance as my goal was to make it both a thriller and a romance. While the two main characters are drawn together out of love, I cover their spine-tingling romance, and they are caught in a much bigger "game afoot" with shadowy figures determined to seize power...whatever the cost.



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Alex Shvartsman

Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-64710-054-4. May 31, 2022. \$16.99

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Apollo Rising, Book One

Alan Smale

Hardcover ISBN 978-1-64710-050-6. July 26, 2022. \$29.99

1979. Vivian Carter is leading the Apollo 32 mission to the Columbia Space Station, orbiting the Moon, when the station comes under attack by the Soviets, and she is ordered to land at Hadley Base on the lunar surface.

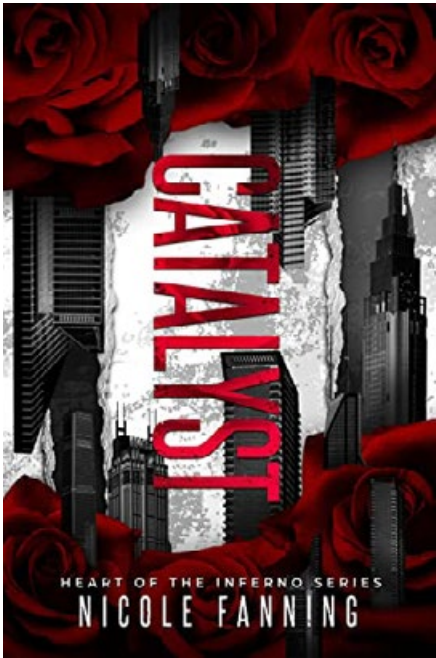
But soon Hadley itself is under attack and Vivian must muster all her resources to help fend off the assault. Why are the Soviets suddenly breaking a peaceful co-existence and jeopardizing everything both nations have worked for?

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Q: Do you write using your cell phone? Why a cell phone versus a tablet or other instrument, and do you dictate or type into the phone? Could you tell us some more about your process for writing?

I constantly write wherever I am. So, whether I'm sitting at the dentist's, on a plane, or riding as a passenger on a long car ride, writing on my phone allows me the flexibility to write wherever I am. I generally put together the plot skeleton for the individual chapter I'm working on, as well as any specific dialogue I want the characters to have.

Later, I transfer the rough



draft to my computer in my home office when I get home. There, I can flush out the ideas I jotted down, work on the dialogue, and really create the fluidity with the surrounding chapters.

Q: Your background was in marketing and Human Resources. When did you decide to leave that career, and what promoted the move?

I believe the human element is by far the most interesting. I believe each of us has been blessed with a gift or a passion and that the world will continue to be a beautiful place if we put those gifts and

passions to good use through the art we create.

I had already been writing casually before the Pandemic forced us all into our houses, and once it became apparent that it would be the norm for a while, my writing became my lifeline and escape from the anxiety of the unknown. Once I had a good chunk of chapters done, I sent the rough draft of the first book to a friend of mine, just for fun. I was shocked when she told me she couldn't put it down, and that's when I decided to leap full time into writing, and I have never been happier!

Q: What's the worst part of the writing process for you, and how do you overcome it?

Setting a writing habit. I learned early on that writers in motion stay in motion, and writers at rest, stay at rest. I needed the structure of having a dedicated portion of every day set aside expressly for writing, or I would get too far behind on schedule. Writing up the general chapter notes on my phone allows me to

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keep to that commitment no matter where I am.

Q: What has been the best moment for you in this journey?

The fans. I know every writer thinks they have the best fans, and none of us are wrong. But my HOTI fans are downright incredible. The Heart of the Inferno Discord was born out of fans' minds, and from there, a beautiful and supportive community has blossomed. Their encouragement has pushed me forward and made HOTI into what it is today, and I will never be able to thank them enough.

Q: Anything else that you wish to share with our readers?

Only that Jaxon Pace is ready to be your next "Book Boyfriend!"

Find Nicole Fanning at:

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<https://amzn.to/3wJgJOM>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nicole.fanning.1>

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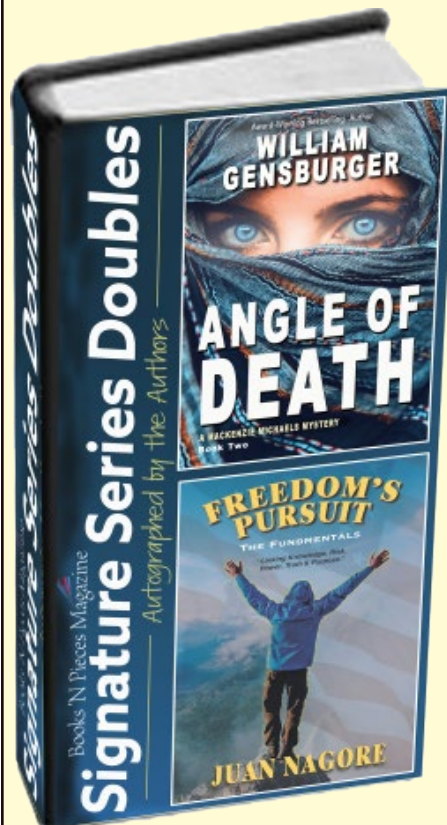
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Gregory Erich Phillips

A Diversified Life From a Literary Family

From a prolific literary family, Gregory Erich Phillips tells aspirational stories through strong, relatable characters that transcend time and place. He lives in Seattle, Washington.

Q: You started writing at age 14. ‘Love of Finished Years,’ your grand prize-winning novel, came out in 2017. What happened in the intervening years, and how did you hone your skill to a point where you could write complete novels?

The first novel I wrote, at 14, was pretty terrible, but by doing it, and finishing it, I created an early habit and belief in my ability to write complete novels. In the years that followed, I think each book I wrote got better, but they still weren’t good enough. When ‘Love of Finished Years’ won the Chanticleer grand prize, it validated all those years of work and told me that I had gotten my craft to the point where it was ready to go out into the world.



Q: It is often quoted that you came from “a prolific literary family.” Could you elaborate on that for our readers and how that impacted you both personally and professionally?

My dad had a very successful career as a novelist. My brother is also a published author. Through my dad I got a great understanding of the business and the writing process from an early age. That is why I started so young. And

my dad has given me invaluable lessons on writing craft through the years.

Q: You have been quoted as saying that writing allows you to ‘explore the world in ways you might not otherwise be able to have the courage to.’ Could you elaborate how writing offers you these avenues or is it just a better way to better understand yourself, your emotions, and how you related to people (you mentioned in an interview that you relate better to women, and all three of your protagonists are female).

This question dives into what I like most about the novel as an art form. As a writer, it allows me to explore perspectives and experiences beyond my scope of actual lived reality. I try to pull readers into characters that do the same for them, and thus, the novel can broaden understanding in both readers and writers. Writing has made me a more

empathetic person, and I hope my books do the same for those who read them.

Q: What's the worst part of the whole writing process for you, and how do you overcome that?

The worst part for me has to be self-promotion, whether in marketing, or in pitching to agents and publishers. It's just not natural for me. The best way to overcome that is to believe in my work and believe that people will want to read it as long as they know about it. That motivates me to get the word out.

Q: Covid helped you complete your latest novel 'A Season of Light' which shares much with current news headlines, from Ukraine to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. How did Covid help you finish this novel that you started in 2015?

Covid provided an opportunity to make 'A Season in Lights' a deeper and more impactful novel than it otherwise would have been. I had a completed version of the novel prior



to the pandemic, but I really wanted to tell the story of how the pandemic, and particularly the shutdown of Broadway and all performing arts venues, impacted performing artists, not only financially but in terms of their entire identity. Having a novel written before these events allowed me to write what became the final chapters with the same authentic shock and uncertainty that we all felt in the early months of 2020. It was a unique experience as an author because I was writing those chapters in the present moment as events were unfolding in New York City.

Q: I understand that you are quite a proficient Tango

dancer, which is not an easy feat to master. How did you learn it, and what was the appeal to you?

I love all forms of dance, but tango is special to me because of the intimacy of both the partnership and the connection of the movement to the music, which is much more fluid than the other partner dance forms. The first time I saw the dance and heard the music I was hooked! I have also found the tango community to be a wonderfully tight-knit community worldwide. Many of my best friends I've met through tango.

Q: You are also a musician. What instrument do you play? How do you find music helps or hinders the writing process?

I play piano and violin and I also sang in choirs for many years. Music and dance are artistic outlets for me that really do contribute to my writing. I bring lessons learned in all three of these art forms to the others, and they all stimulate me in unique but compatible ways. With my writing, I draw from my life experience, and



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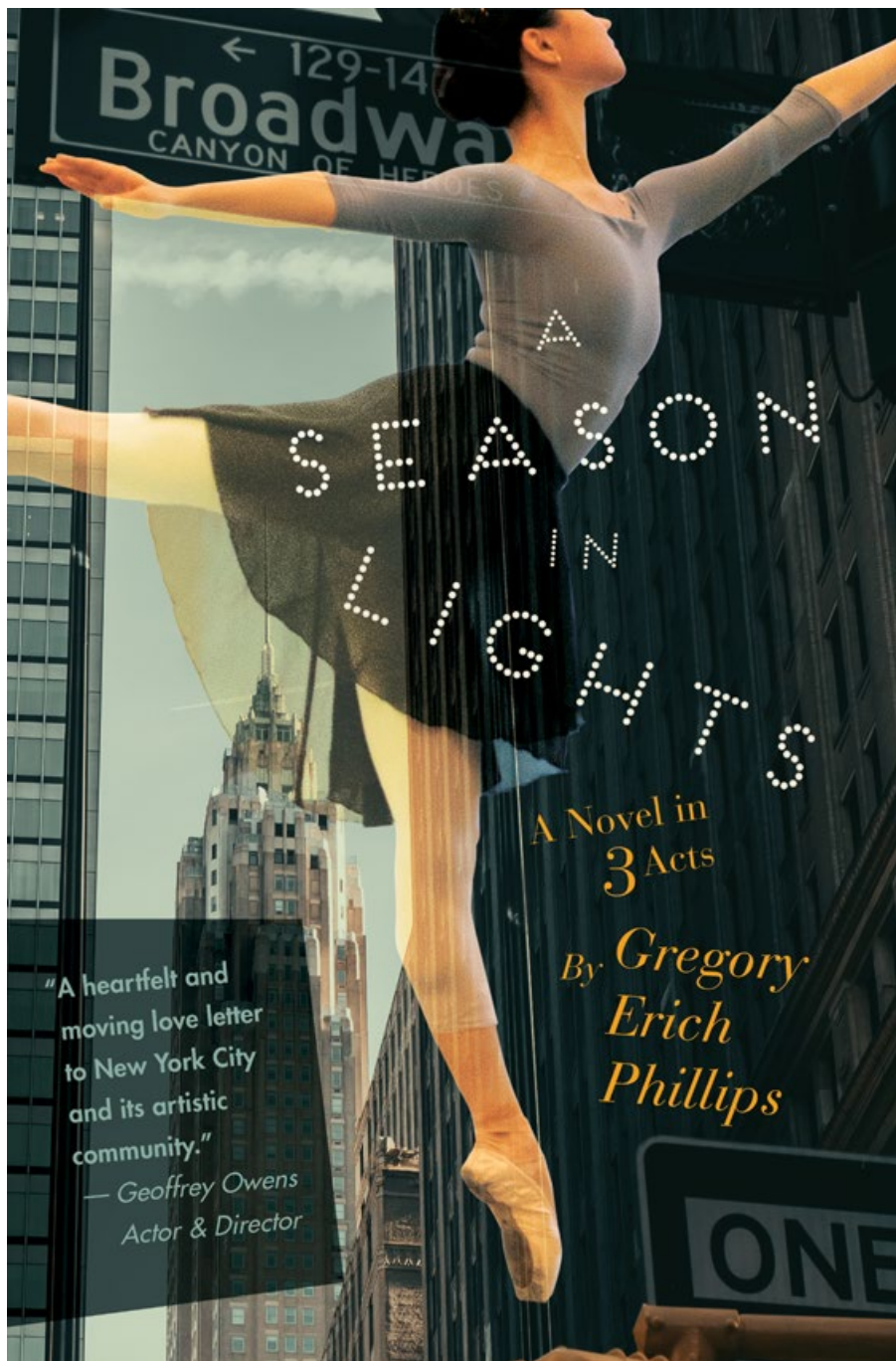


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'A Season in Lights' is the perfect example of how much my music and dance experience contributed.

Q: On your website, there is a photo of you on a sailboat. Do you sail?

I don't, but I love being on

boats with people who know how!

Q: Is there anything you wish to share with our readers I have not asked you? Any events or accolades to note?

'A Season in Lights' has won several major awards, including the Somerset Award for contemporary and literary fiction, the Book of the Year by the Write Review, and most recently, first prize in the Book Excellence Awards.

As an author, these awards give validation and encourage me to keep on writing.

Learn more about Gregory Phillips at:

Amazon: <https://amzn.to/3l-GeOef>

Website: <https://gregoryerich-phillips.com>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/gregoryerichphillips>

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MICKEY MIKKELSON

What Can a Publicist Do For You? Creative-Edge Publicity Founder Explains



Q1. What made you decide that being a publicist was a career that would work for you?

I didn't decide that this was a career to strive for. It fell into my lap as I was helping out a friend who had written a book. I previously worked at Chapters as an events coordinator, and the friend who had written a novel, asked me to get her a couple of signings. Well, two signings turned into eight signings, and she essentially ended up conducting a full Alberta tour which resulted in her book becoming national with Indigo. News got out, and the word spread, and very soon,

I was getting other author opportunities and decided that there was perhaps a market for this. Lo and behold, Creative Edge was formed.

Q2. How did you get started? Formation of Creative Edge? How did you develop your client base? (I ask because writers and others have trouble approaching people).

Working at Chapters, I developed a strong relationship with many authors in Alberta. Years later, when I realized I had a passion for publicity, I was able to leverage a number of those relationships as my first clients. That was when I decided to form Creative Edge, which today has over 100 clients, representing three N.Y. Times Bestsellers, six USA Today Bestsellers, six publishers, and contacts with media internationally in T.V., Radio, and Print Media, as well as reviewers, podcasts, and bloggers.

My client base was originally

built through word of mouth and networking through a variety of writing events such as 'When Words Collide,' which is a prominent literary festival in Western Canada. Western Canada was definitely where everything started, and we have been able to branch out from there now, internationally. We have worked with book festivals such as the South Dakota Festival of Books, and the Imaginarium Festival in Washington D.C. . Ultimately, our client base is about forty percent Canadian, forty percent American, and twenty percent from other countries like the U.K. and Australia.

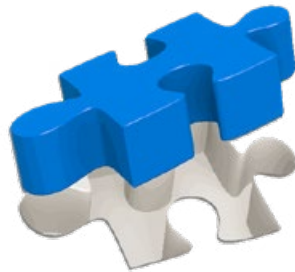
Q3. You have an excellent client list that includes Robert J. Sawyer. People might remember him as the author behind the television series FLASH FORWARD a few years back, based on his book of the same name. With all his successes, how much more complex are your efforts with him? How did you and Robert connect,

and what were his goals in hiring a publicist?

At the time, Robert had an in-house publicist at Penguin Random House, and they did a lot of work with him, specifically around his book marketing. I met Robert for the first time when I worked at Chapters as he came for a book event, and after that, I always stayed in touch with him. When I started Creative Edge, I ended up representing a number of authors that are within both of our circles of community. Robert reached out to me, and in truth, I wasn't sure what I could do for him, knowing that he had an in-house publicist and a very reputable name both in the literary and television/film mediums.

His goals were no different than any other author in terms of promotion, except that the areas of media targeted were of a larger scale. Robert wanted in-depth interviews, book reviews about his newest book 'Quantum Night' and his previous catalog. In addition to that, he also wanted help promoting his brand for television and film. In terms of complexity, the press re-

leases sent out were more strategic with further in-depth information. Overall, the effort was no different than for my other clients, as I always give 100 percent. Still in many cases, we did get more media results based on Robert's reputation as a bestselling and award-winning author.



CREATIVE EDGE

Q4. Most writers tend to be introverted, not particularly good at marketing themselves. Do you offer a pre-set package for them or coach them on what they need, or is it a custom process where each person has a role?

With every client, I sit down with them and talk about short-term and long-term goals. There is not a pre-set package per se, however, every author has a set contract and a maximum amount of dollars they are expected to pay each month. In most cas-

es, the full amount charged works out to be less than if they were to pay for everything on an individual basis. I coach my clients on what they should be doing, but it's a collaboration. We take the best idea between us and execute it to its fullest. Not every author is great at book signings, and others struggle with online events or speaking engagements. My role is to communicate with my clients and tailor all marketing aspects to their strengths.

Q5. Writers want sales. Writers would not object to a degree of notability (not necessarily fame). What do publicists aspire for? What is the golden prize for you?

I didn't get into this to become rich and famous, but I want to run a successful business. That means effectively supporting my clients in a way that sees them through to achieving their goals. I am happy knowing that I am creating a community where authors and artists share ideas and support each other. Building community is essentially the Creative Edge brand and the golden prize.

Q6. Describe a typical day for you? Challenges? Joys? Worst?

As a publicist, there is never a typical day. Everything is different every single day. But things I do are usually setting up book signings for a client, issuing press releases to media, calling authors, and touching base as I insist on communication with my clients at a minimum bi-weekly. There are some that I talk to every day. In terms of sending out press releases, I am typically sending out about 300 emails for one release and I try to personalize the emails based on the receiver of the information. It's a lot of work, but an effective way to develop stronger relationships.

Most writers are introverts and in a lot of cases have different personality types because they are creative. The biggest challenge is monitoring that and finding ways to

connect with each personality. The most effective way I have found to do that is to set clear expectations about how the publicity process works and then gauge each individual's long-term goal and develop a plan on how we are going to



Mickey Mikkelson at client Miranda Oh's book launch. Photo courtesy Creative Edge Publicity

get there. The joys are easy! Working with so many talented people day in and day out is so rewarding, as is getting to know key influencers in the media. Even when it's overwhelming, it's always gratifying.

Worst? There is no worst

to what I do. I love it all, even when it appears to be painful mentally! However, if I was to indicate times when they are not as fun, I would say when there are communication breakdowns between my client and me. It doesn't happen very often, but it does happen, and when it does, it is challenging to manage the relationship and still be 100% effective in my role.

Q7. Advice for writers who believe a publicist would be a good option? What are your criteria for considering an author? Are you open to authors contacting you (if so best way)? What % of sales do publicists get, or are you flat rate/hourly?

I believe that writers need to be ready before seeking out a publicist. If you don't have your books available in all sectors, including online and in print, you are not ready. If you don't have a direction that you want to go in terms of marketing, then you are also not ready. The most successful authors are the ones who have a set plan in place and can leverage a publicist to get

them there. In addition, most authors have to learn to work with a publicist and realize that by hiring one, they are no longer on their own in terms of marketing. These same authors have to learn to work and leverage the person they just hired; otherwise the partnership will not work.

I look for authors that have a vision and clear expectations. I look for authors who have strong communication skills and are committed to an honest relationship. I never sign an author based only on

the quality of the book. It is a factor, but I am making my decision based on a personality connection and mutual respect not only for me, but for my other represented clients as well.

I don't take a percentage of sales unless I book my clients at a speaking engagement or an event where they are paid a fee. Then I usually take approximately 5% to 10%. All of my represented clients pay a maximum cap per month, but it is results-based, and clients only pay if they are effectively

booked. If I don't book them during the month, then they are not obligated to pay for that month. In terms of standardizing, everyone's fee is different, and all contracts are independently confidential.

I am always looking for new talent. I can be contacted by:

Email: mickey.creativeedge@gmail.com

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Teri M Brown

A Determined Writer

Born in Athens, Greece as an Air Force brat, Teri M Brown came into this world with an imagination full of stories to tell. She now calls the North Carolina coast home, and the peaceful nature of the sea has been a great source of inspiration for her creativity.

Not letting 2020 get the best of her, Teri chose to go on an adventure that changed her outlook on life. She and her husband, Bruce, rode a tandem bicycle across the United States from Astoria, Oregon to Washington DC, successfully raising money for Toys for Tots. She learned she is stronger than she realized and capable of anything she sets her mind to.

Q: You won the First Annual Anita Bloom Orloff Award for a short story about your grandfather's life. Was that the first validation of your



writing ability, or had that come to you differently?

I began writing for small businesses - articles, blog posts, emails, website content, and ebooks in 2000. By the time of the Anita Bloom Orloff Award, I felt very capable of writing in this niche. However, I was living in an emotionally abusive relationship. I had been told, and unfortunately, believed that just because I could write non-fiction didn't mean I had the talent to write fiction. After reading the piece I wrote on my grandfather for his funeral, a group of online friends suggested the contest.

At their urging, I revised it for the contest but had no expectations of winning. When I won, I was ecstatic. My abusive husband shattered my joy by suggesting it was a tiny contest with few entrants, so it didn't mean anything. However, a little piece of me began to wonder if I could write. When I was given a chance to go to a writer's retreat, I took it and wrote my first novel. Although it wasn't very good, it was enough to realize that I was capable. I left the 14-year marriage two weeks later and haven't looked back.

Q: In 2018, you wrote 'Sunflowers Beneath the Snow,' appropriately relevant today due to its historical setting in Ukraine. Could you elaborate on how the story came about and what made you decide on the setting?

Two of my daughters worked as counselors for several

summers at a summer camp. The camp hired several international students each year, and one was a Ukrainian girl named Ksenia. My girls met her in 2013 and again in 2014. However, when she was ready to go home in August 2014, she had no home to return to. Russia had invaded Ukraine, and her parents lived right on the front line of the conflict.

Ksenia was given an extended work Visa and began working with a lawyer to remain in the US. The process took a long time, and her lawyer suggested she would have to go to a refugee camp in Poland. She was 19, knew no one in Poland, and didn't speak Polish. So, she went to New York City and disappeared into the Brighton Beach area, where she continued working with a lawyer. Within six months, she was given legal status to stay in the US.

In 2016, she came to our home to visit for my youngest daughter's birthday and told me an incredible sliver of a story that happened to her in NYC. I had trouble believing what she said was factual and assumed that we were having

a communication issue, so I repeated everything I thought I heard. It turns out that the incredible story was true. I felt it needed to be told, but I was still in the abusive relationship and didn't believe I was the one to tell it.

Then, in 2018, I went to another writer's retreat and used that little sliver as a basis for a novel. I based the story in Ukraine to stay true to the teller and created 82,000 words of fiction to get to that ending. The last three pages of the last chapter—not the epilogue, which is all fiction again—is true.

Q: What's your writing style like, and how do you balance life and writing?

I'm a binge writer. I love to have a long time to write, and then I immerse myself completely. I'm also a panster, preferring to let my characters dictate the story as I go. I usually have a vague idea where the story will end, but not always.

As an older binge writer with no children left in the home, balancing writing and life isn't

too tricky. I have remarried, and my new companion encourages me to do what I need. So, I typically go on two writer's retreats each year and disappear into the upstairs office for a day or two when the writing mood strikes.

Q: You rode a tandem bike across the US with your husband Bruce during the height of Covid, raising \$34,000 for Toys for Tots in the process. Either of those two alone is noteworthy, but together seem to reflect your attitudes about life. Would you say this is accurate, and if so, why?

That's interesting. I hadn't looked at my adventure from that angle. I was hungry for an experience to prove to the world that I still had worth. In actuality, I needed to prove that to myself. However, the idea of riding across the US just for me or just because it was a dream of my husband's didn't seem like enough. So, we added in a fundraiser component. Doing it "for the kids" was a great way to keep going when the days got tough, and there were many tough days. I emerged from the adventure a

different person. I now realize that I can do anything I set my mind to, which is something I believed long ago but had forgotten.

Q: I read that you wrote 50,000 words during a week of NaNoWriMo. That's a lot. How many hours each day were you writing, and how did you avoid getting burned out?

When I binge-write, I tend to write between 8 and 10 hours a day. I don't burn out because at the end of the session, I don't write again until the writing bug strikes. That could be a week or three months, but eventually, I have a character yelling in my ear, so I find another block of time.

Q: How do you see yourself as an author, and what new challenges are you looking forward to?

As a debut author, I feel as if I am still evolving. I know that I don't want to be pigeon-holed into a niche. Although I have a historical fiction out and another one on the way, I don't think so much about the genre as I write character-driven fiction.

The setting isn't as important if the characters are believable and evolve.

With that said, I have an idea for yet another historical fiction, but I also have a rom-com floating around in my head, as well as a memoir-type book based on my tandem bicycle ride and two children's picture books.



Q: Ballroom dancing?

I love music and love to dance. When my husband and I were dating, he pulled me into his arms and said, "I want to dance in the kitchen with you every day for the rest of my life." The senior cen-

ter started offering ballroom dance lessons right after we married, so we began taking them. There is a great organization called the Ballroom Dance Preservation Society that offers several dances each month. I'm not very good, but we have a great time.

Q: Anything that I have not asked you would like to touch on?

I am so grateful for readers, and I love interacting with those who love books. I try my best to respond to anyone who reaches out to me, so if you have questions about me, the book, or writing in general, I'd love to hear from you.

You can find Teri M Brown at:

Web: <https://www.terimbrown.com>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/TeriMBrown1>

Facebook: <https://facebook.com/teriMBrownAuthor>

Instagram: https://instagram.com/terimbrown_author

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THE HOUSE IN THE CERULEAN SEA

by TJ Klune

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A magical island. A dangerous task. A burning secret.

Linus Baker leads a quiet, solitary life. At forty, he lives in a tiny house with a devious cat and his old records. As a Case Worker at the Department in Charge Of Magical Youth, he spends his days overseeing the well-being of children in government-sanctioned orphanages.

When Linus is unexpectedly summoned by Extremely Upper Management he's given a curious and highly classified assignment: travel to Marsyas Island Orphanage, where six dangerous children reside: a gnome, a sprite, a wyvern, an unidentifiable green blob, a were-Pomeranian, and the Antichrist. Linus must set aside his fears and determine whether or not they're likely to bring about the end of days.

But the children aren't the only secret the island keeps. Their caretaker is the charming and enigmatic Arthur Parnassus, who will do anything to keep his wards safe. As Arthur and Linus grow closer, long-held secrets are exposed, and Linus must make a choice: destroy a home or watch the world burn.

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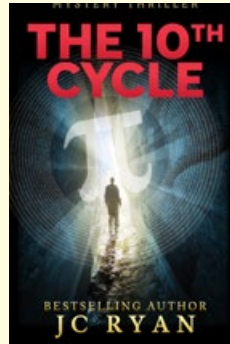
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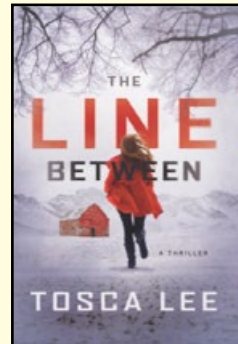
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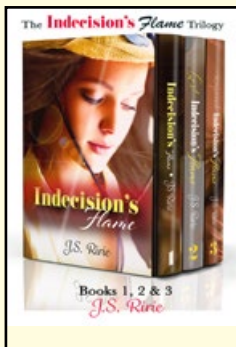
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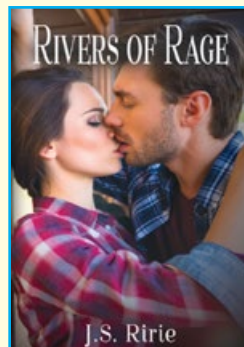
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Brylee Hawkins was going home to confront her father so she could marry the man of her dreams. But the Australian Outback wasn't the place she remembered [Click HERE.](#)



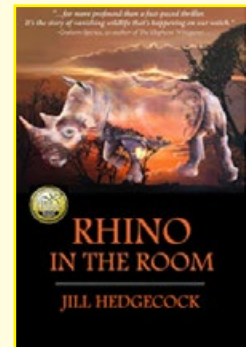
Her parents had dropped her off at a stranger's house with no intention of returning. But left with the will to survive, she embraces a new life. [Click HERE.](#)



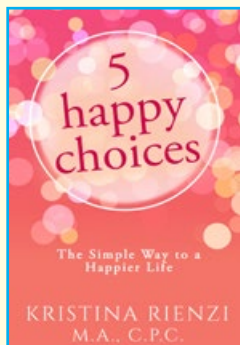
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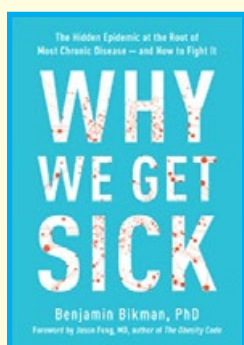
It was meant to be a harmless stag-night prank. But a few hours later, the groom has disappeared and his friends are dead. Roy Grace is contacted to learn the truth. [Click HERE.](#)



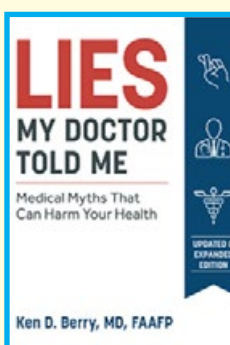
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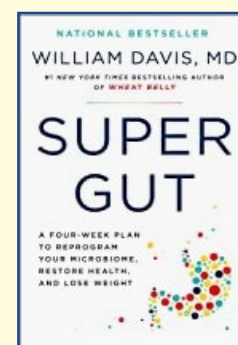
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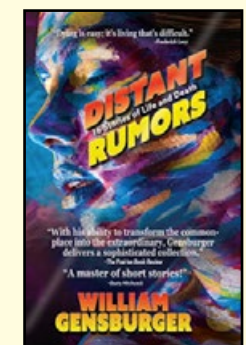
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TALES FROM THE SCRIPT

Observations and Opinions on Screenwriting by script doctor
LANCE THOMPSON | scriptdoc88@gmail.com

Torn Pages

Director John Ford was not known for his cordial relations with producers and studio executives. When Ford was making *Mogambo*, he was visited on set by the film's producer, Sam Zimbalist. Zimbalist pointed out to Ford that the complex production was three days behind schedule. Ford picked up his script, tore out three pages, and said, "Now we're back on schedule."

Ford never felt constrained by words on the page, and frequently cut out scenes or pages or entire story lines when he felt it was necessary. Though the *Mogambo* story is a colorful example of Ford's tempestuous behavior, it also contains a valuable lesson for screenwriters.

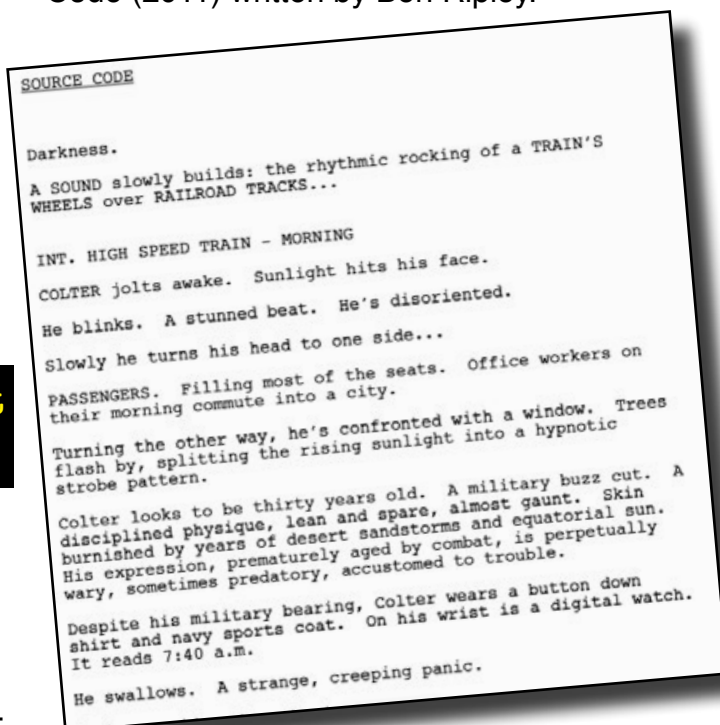
Tearing pages from a script can be very helpful.

Many scripts start too early and end too late. Writers may feel that characters and story need a prologue or set-up to familiarize the audience with the situation. Likewise, writers think that their stories need elaborate explanations after the climax to tie up loose ends and let the audience know what becomes of all the characters.

Usually, that is unnecessary. Audiences are

quick to catch on to the action and don't need to have every detail explained to them. Audiences are sophisticated enough to be dropped into the middle of the tale and figure out the story on the fly. A story is more engaging if the audience is required to work a little bit to figure out what's going on.

A good example of this is the film *Source Code* (2011) written by Ben Ripley.



It is a science fiction story about a character who must relive the same day over and over in order to stop a terrorist attack. The mechanics of the plot are complex, but they

are revealed gradually as the movie progresses, not all at once in a clumsy introductory exposition. The movie begins with the plot already in motion and proceeds at a breathless pace. It is an effective sci-fi thriller that respects the audience's ability to follow a com-

plicated plot without unnecessary explanation that slows down the action.

It's okay to require the audience to devote some effort to follow the story. Trust them to pay attention and figure things out for themselves. Respect the audience. Don't waste

their time. And when in doubt, tear out a few pages.

You can read the full script [HERE](#).

Lance Thompson is a screenwriter, script doctor and ghost writer. He can be reached by email at scriptdoc88@gmail.com.

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Rex Dalton and his team are sent on a covert mission to recruit one of the People's Liberation Army's most senior generals to spy for the CIA.

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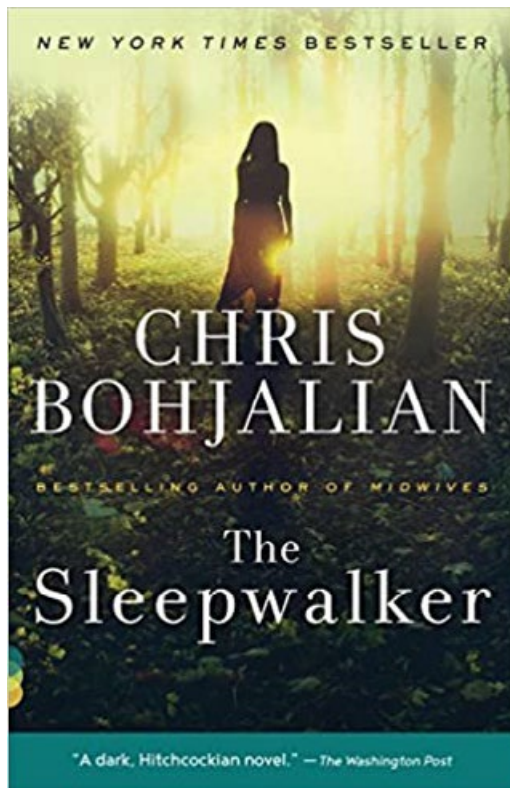
BOOKENDS by Jill Hedgecock

AUTHOR: 'Between Shadow's Eyes' and 'Rhino in the Room'
www.jillhedgecock.com

'The Sleepwalker' by Chris Bohjalian

'The Sleepwalker' (2017, Vintage, paperback, re-print edition, 302 pages, \$13.48) by Chris Bohjalian explores the phenomenon of sleepwalking, also called somnambulism. The story centers on the aftermath left by a mother, Annalee, who disappears from her bed one night, and the lingering impacts on her family. Set in Vermont, the novel is part thriller, part whodunit, and part romance.

The tale's focus is Annalee's daughter, twenty-one-year-old Lianna Ahlberg, who experienced sleepwalking as a child. Lianna becomes obsessed with discovering what happened on that fateful night after her mother's body is found in a nearby river. With her father's inability to adjust to a new life without his wife, Lianna steps into a parenting role for her 12-year-old sister, Paige, who has sleepwalking incidents of her own. Lianna's typical young adult life as a college



student and her side gig as an amateur magician fall by the wayside as she takes on domestic chores such as grocery shopping and making sure Paige has completed her homework.

When she befriends an older, handsome, and mysterious detective, Gavin, who has a past with her mother, Lianna lies to her father about her whereabouts when she sees the man. Initially, Lianna's

interest in Gavin is based on her goal to stay close to the investigation of her mother's death, but she soon gets involved with the detective who suffers from the same sleepwalking affliction as her deceased mother. Lianna's sleuthing soon leads her to discover troubling facts regarding her mother's sex life and her parent's relationship.

Lianna, who isn't coping well with her mother's death, turns to substance abuse and self-destructive behavior. Her father, a poetry professor at Middlebury College, is fighting his own demons. He blames himself because Annalee only sleepwalks when he is gone, and he had left for a poetry conference the night his wife disappeared.

As Lianna probes deeper into the troubling facts surrounding her mother's life, she questions her judgment and trust in the man with whom she's involved. Full of

twists and turns, *The Sleepwalker* will keep you guessing what happened to Annalee until the very end.

'*The Sleepwalker*,' is one of Chris Bohjalian's 20 books, including '*The Flight Attendant*,' '*The Guest Room*,' and '*Midwives*,' a #1 New York Times bestseller and a selection of Oprah's Book Club. Chris's work has been translated into 35 languages. Three of his novels have become movies ('*Secrets of Eden*,' '*Midwives*,' and '*Past the Bleachers*'), and '*The Flight Attendant*' has been adapted for a television drama starring Kaley Cuoco. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa and Summa Cum Laude from Amherst College. Chris lives in Vermont with his wife, the photographer Victoria Blewer.

Follow him at www.chris-bohjalian.com.

*Jill Hedgecock is the author of *Between Shadow's Eyes* and *Award-Winning Rhino in the Room* www.jillhedgecock.com*



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(Aces High Jokers Wild #4)

by O. E. Tearmann

"You see, they've given you an enemy to hate. They've given you something to fear and to fight; the perverse, the Other. Because what does it matter that there are no more civil rights, that shareholders and corporations run our lives, when there's threats out there? Threats like two girls in love or someone planting apple trees." Because while you're fighting the terrorists and the immigrants and the 'fags', you're not thinking. And if you ever had the time to start thinking, you might wonder why it's illegal to collect rainwater. . . You might start noticing the bars on your cage, if you weren't given something 'better' to fret over."

How powerful is this?! Oh my god. Love it, love it, love it!

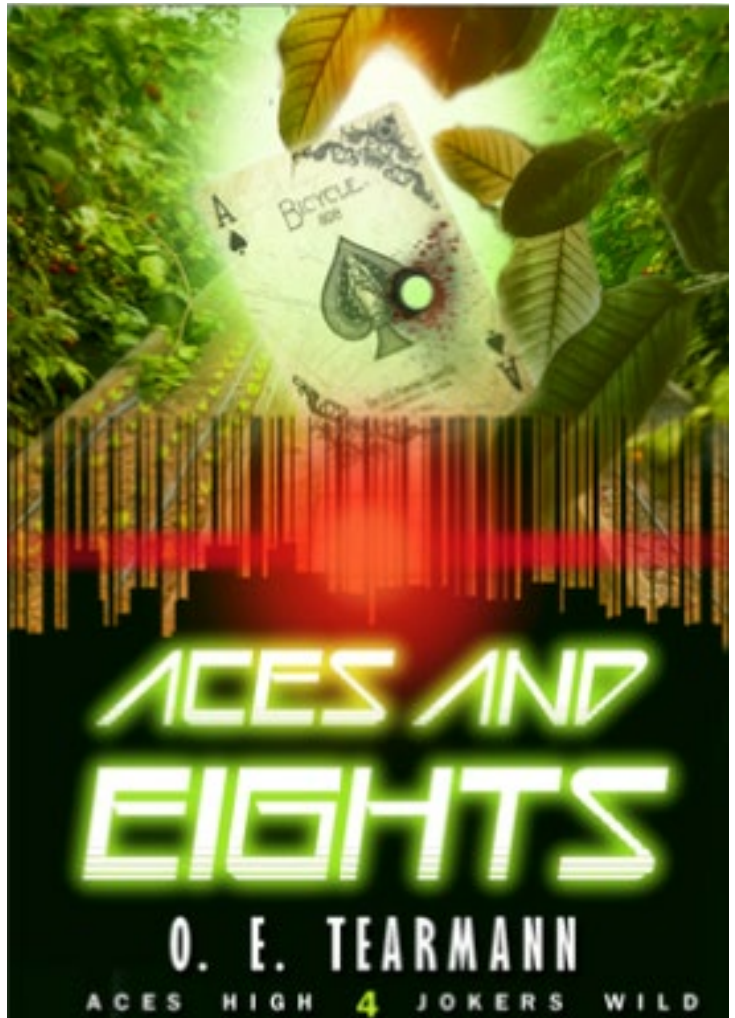
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William Gensburger's Writing *with* Class

What is a Logline/Tagline and Why Do I Need One?

There is one element of writing that must be fully understood. It is an element that most authors do not handle well and, ironically, something complicated compared to writing over three hundred pages of a story. That is the logline, or synopsis, so concise that it takes no more than a sentence or two.

Screenwriters call it a logline or elevator pitch; you are in an elevator with a production executive, and they ask you

has seen 'Star Wars.' Let's pretend that you are George Lucas in the elevator, and you get asked what your script is about.

Do you say: "It's a fantastic space battle between good guys, a princess, and the evil empire, and there are robots and something called The Force that helps the good guys win."

Huh? I was lost at 'princess.' And what is a Force? Let's try again.

elling heroes, and non-stop action."

The last one doesn't tell you much in the way of details, but it gives you enough insight to pique the executive's interest. After all, what you are after are the 'magic words': "Send it to me. I want to read it."

You see, you will never sell your story until the right people read it. Assuming you have written it well, your story, or script, will then sell itself. But the most challenging part

NO ONE CARES ABOUT YOUR STORY.

what your story is about.

You have a very short time explaining it in a compelling way, covering the basics and selling the project before the elevator doors open and the executive walks off.

You cannot ramble on. You cannot mumble your words. You cannot get caught on what a brilliant story it is. You must dissect it into one or two very precise sentences.

Let's practice. Everyone

"Good versus evil, a mystical Force guides our space knights to battle the evil empire to rescue a princess and save the galaxy. Enter a swashbuckling space pirate trying to collect a reward who unwittingly becomes one of the heroes."

Much better, yes? One more time.

"It's a swashbuckling adventure set in space, complete with mystical villains, com-

is getting someone to read it.

I always tell my writing students: "No one cares about your story. You have to make them care." That means small, irresistible bites, offering enough to make the executive want to read it.

To illustrate the importance of knowing your logline or elevator pitch, you must first understand the sheer volume of submissions that occur. You are a droplet in an ocean, a

piece of dust in the wind, one star in an endless universe. Hundreds of writers are out there, each submitting, vying for that coveted publication. Script readers have hundred of submitted scripts to read in a weekend. They open the script and read the first page. If that grabs them, they read more. But before that even happens, someone in the office reads your logline and immediately decides to pass or go on. Get the picture?

ested in learning more, taking one of our writing classes, or having us critique your work. Email: william@booksnpieces.com

Here are some well-known book and film loglines/taglines: (source: screen.craft.org)

In space, no one can hear you scream. (Alien)

There are 3.7 trillion fish in the ocean. They're looking

A young F.B.I. cadet must confide in an incarcerated and manipulative killer to receive his help in catching another serial killer who skins his victims. (Silence of the Lambs)

A seventeen-year-old aristocrat falls in love with a kind but poor artist aboard the luxurious, ill-fated R.M.S. Titanic. (Titanic)

YOU HAVE TO MAKE THEM CARE!

It doesn't sound very encouraging, does it. But it doesn't have to be. If you are a writer, you had better believe in your writing and yourself to stand firm, submit and follow up, withstand the fear, ignore the competition, reject the rejections, and keep going.

But before that, develop a solid summary of your story and practice it on family and friends. It takes no time for that elevator to reach the next floor, and you cannot stumble over your words. Get it down. Memorize it. Rehearse it. Live it.

Contact me if you are inter-

for one. (Finding Nemo)

The longer you wait, the harder it gets. (The 40-Year-Old Virgin)

Just because they serve you doesn't mean they like you. (Clerks)

You don't get to 500 million friends without making a few enemies. (The Social Network)

The aging patriarch of an organized crime dynasty transfers control of his clandestine empire to his reluctant son. (The Godfather)

A prince cursed to spend his days as a hideous monster sets out to regain his humanity by earning a young woman's love. (Beauty & the Beast)

A seemingly indestructible android is sent from 2029 to 1984 to assassinate a waitress whose unborn son will lead humanity in a war against the machines. A soldier from that war is sent to protect her at all costs. (Terminator)

**•GRAB YOUR READERS!
•HONE YOUR PITCH**

First Pages

A study of published author first pages.



Love of Finished Years

Chapter One

An Old German Wedding

September, 1909

The tenement steps were still dark as the teenage girl descended from her fourth-floor apartment. She held on to the shaky banister, quickly measuring the uneven steps. In the last four years, she had climbed down them so many mornings that she could have done it with her eyes closed. She knew each sag, each crack.

Elsa tried to tell herself this morning was no different from all those others, but she couldn't shake the knowledge that if she failed today, everything would change.

As she opened the front door, gray light entered the dusty building. The crisp air of early autumn bathed her face. There were no electric street lamps here on 3rd Street, but she could see the glow from Second Avenue. She headed that way. Despite the darkness, the Lower East Side was quickly coming to life.

Physically exhausted but mentally alert, she pressed on into the city. She was accustomed to weariness—it had become her way of life.

At sixteen, Elsa knew most people took her for an adult. With her brown hair, fair face and broad shoulders, she blended easily into a crowd. Much as she might long for her sister Sonja's slender frame and delicate face, she had begun to appreciate the strength that helped her cope through these times. It was good that Sonja's factory days had come to an end.

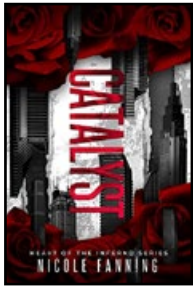
The events of this week had pushed Elsa's strength to its limit. These were supposed to be days of joy. Now it was up to her to save her family from another disaster.

The windows on Second Avenue began to show signs of life. Shadows moved around inside unlit apartments. Dawn still came early enough to prepare for the day by natural light. In another week or two, precious cents would need to be spent to dress by gaslight.

Elsa hurried down the sidewalks of the Bowery as the city awakened. The morning sun shot between the buildings to her left, casting a long shadow beneath the elevated railway.

Two boys pushed a cart loaded with lettuce and cabbage heads, as an eager dog danced between its wheels. Soon a second cart appeared, and before Elsa had walked another block,

from 'Love of Finished Years' by Gregory Erich Phillips. Buy it at <https://amzn.to/3LVVRba>



Catalyst (Heart of the Inferno Book 1)

Chapter 1

The Assassin

I have a text.

8:35 p.m.: He is on his way.

Good. It's about time.

I lay my money down on the bar and make my way outside. Finding a solitary bench, I light a cigarette and wait, watching the hotel guests coming and going.

A group of giddy teenagers with colored braces taking pictures for their social media accounts. The married businessman with his tiny suitcase, getting a good 'last squeeze' of some slutty brunette's ass before hopping into a separate cab. An exhausted couple with out-of-state plates and two young kids, yelling at them to stay close. All of them caught up in their own lives.

Fuck them and their pathetic lives.

Lives that mean nothing to me.

Neither does his.

I hear the motorcycle approaching and take a drag on my cigarette as it pulls up into valet. I shift on the bench making sure my gun is accessible.

I could do it here.

I know it is not part of the Plan, but I could.

I could put a bullet in Chicago's favorite son and resident billionaire playboy.

Effectively ending his reign in this city.

It would be so easy.

One bullet.

But I am not here for him today.

I look out over the top of my sunglasses just in time to see him getting off the bike. The woman he is with steps off too, and he helps with her helmet, before pulling her in for a kiss.

Her.

The recent anomaly in the carefully tailored life of Jaxon Pace.

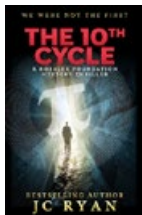
She stares into his eyes, and I wonder if she knows.

I wonder if she knows that this is not like him.

That he is not really a PDA kind of guy.

But here he is, fawning over her like a lovesick puppy.

from 'Catalyst' Book 1, Heart of the Inferno by Nicole Fanning. Buy it at <https://amzn.to/3LWlzMV>



Prologue

10th Cycle year 25,990 A city near the present site of Giza, Egypt

The Supreme Council of Knowledge had been in session for more than two hours and the mood between the twenty-one elders was somber, although what they heard excited some.

Aleph, first among the members, listened attentively as Zebulon, their youngest, made his request. The nineteen Chosen who ranked between the two listened in various mental states, some supporting, others dismayed. Zebulon, a genius and excellent orator, was making a compelling argument, succeeding in convincing the elders that he had a worthy cause.

Concluding, he said. "We have made our world a better place since we received it nearly 26,000 years ago. Why should we not pass the benefit of our knowledge on to Those Who Come After? Our world will end soon, in about ten years if my calculations are correct. We have nothing more to prove or achieve, our time has come and gone. Let us be gracious about it. A new civilization will be built on the ruins of ours. Why should we not give them the best chance to build it even better than ours? A chance to break the cycle of destruction? They are our children and descendants. We owe it to them. I beg you to consider wisely." Zebulon bowed and sat down.

All eyes were on Aleph as he made his answer. "Why would we undertake this task? It has ever been so, God has decreed it. Civilizations are born, they live and grow and they are destroyed. This is the tenth Cycle. Those Who Come After in the eleventh must once again learn wisdom in their own Cycle and in their own way. You defy the natural order!"

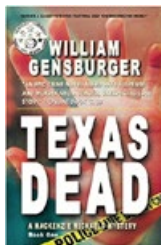
"With respect, Aleph, show me in the holy writings where God has decreed we may not reveal our knowledge to Those Who Come After." A gasp went up as nineteen pairs of eyes flew to Aleph expecting to see his rage. Instead, they saw him in deep thought.

He looked at Zebulon. "Very well, you have spoken well, and have convinced me. If the rest of the members agree, you may gather the information and build your Library of Knowledge of the Tenth Cycle." The nineteen members nodded their heads in agreement.

Aleph looked around, confirming he had the support of everyone, and continued. "The Council will bear the expense of what you described to us. But there is one very important condition. You must devise and encode the message in such a way that it is time-locked to Those Who Come After. They will first have to achieve a high measure of intelligence and civil behavior before they can read it. Only when they have advanced to the point where they can read and understand the message will they be ready to make use of the information you will leave for them to improve their world. If you fail to do so, it might cause them much more harm than the good you intend for them."

The other nineteen members nodded their heads in agreement again.

from 'The Tenth Cycle' Book 1, by J.C. Ryan . Buy it at <https://amzn.to/3lS67XA>



Kennedy

Texas Dead: A Mackenzie Michaels Mystery

The pretty detective was late, not that it mattered—the corpse, which had been face down in the alley for quite some time, wasn't going anywhere. Although she had known since seven in the morning, despite the break in the rain and an abundance of cabs, she arrived after the last reporter on the scene. This annoyed her more than anything else; her car was in the shop—new brakes—leaving her no way to get here.

Maxie preferred to be at crime scenes before the reporters arrived. It gave the image of professionalism; she was a firm believer in professionalism. It also allowed her a chance to examine the scene free of distractions, even before the medical examiner. Clues were to be found everywhere. From the position of the body, items around, skin mottling, as well as the attire of the victim, all were clues that could be useful in her *first look*.

The city was Corpus Christi, Texas, the name a literal translation meaning *the body of Christ* which, as she approached, she thought ironic, given this body, along with the others she had recently encountered, would experience no resurrection. Worse, this was the fifteenth body of the year, and it was only April. Usually Corpus Christi had between five and ten murders a year. This was, she considered, a *spate of killings*, and out of the norm, a very ominous sign.

Her partner, Kobe Jameson, a thirty-something Jamaican man with a smoothly shaved head and equally smooth, dark skin, was already on the scene. He nodded at her as she approached. Kobe had been her right hand for the past nine years; she relied on him to keep her—as she liked to call it—*balanced*, especially during the heat of the cases when things happened quickly, as tempers boiled over. Kobe had a keen eye, a knack for following leads, and, more critical to Maxie, a sense of humor. *In this line of work, you need a sense of humor or the life gets sucked right out of you*, she thought. Burnout rates were high.

The camera crews were finishing up their background shots. *Reporters are like birds on a phone line*, she considered, *all looking the same, moving the same, similar gestures. All were trying to be relevant in their moment of fame.*

Her full name was MacKenzie Michaels, but everyone called her 'Maxie.' Tall, slender, shoulder-length light-brown hair with a hinting of added color, usually auburn. She was thirty-eight, attractive, with a contagious smile and an even more infectious laugh; a seasoned detective with many cases under her belt—not just cases, but solved cases, something that earned her praise from the higher-ups, giving her a degree of autonomy and political clout. Everyone wanted to be close to Maxie. Maxie was the standard to which they aspired.

Today, she wore a linen skirt, collared blouse, with her trademark pale blue silk scarf. Maxie always believed in looking her best, part of the charm captivating the public, the paparazzi, along with the local celebrities. *Because you deal in homicides for a living doesn't mean you can't look good*, she thought.

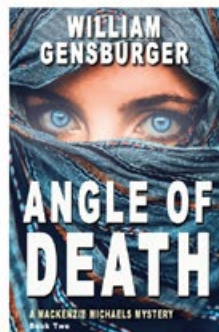
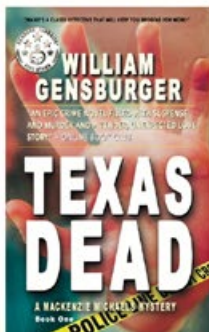
from 'Texas Dead' Book 1, by William Gensburger. Buy it at <https://amzn.to/3Gr09pX>

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CHAPTER ONE

On my sixteenth birthday, I wished for an ordinary life. All I wanted on that special day six months ago was to be a teen girl who got good grades in high school, a girl whose mother hadn't died in childbirth, and whose father didn't have cancer. If only I could turn back the clock and stand in front of that pink cake with its flickering candles knowing then that my father would not survive no matter how much I wanted a different outcome. I would ask instead for a life without secrets and a dog that didn't bark all day while I was away at work.

As I steered my car onto Cherryglen Lane and maneuvered it into my driveway, I knew my post-birthday requests would never come true. Especially the one about my dog. The presence of a white envelope wedged into the screen door confirmed Shadow's barking was still causing problems. Because animal control had already contacted me by phone, the letter was not a surprise. This was the third citation triggered by my dog's behavior.

I pressed my forehead against the steering wheel letting the vibrations of the idling engine travel through my tired body. I really had no idea what to do. Since Dad died, decisions overwhelmed me. The Game Plan Rules he left behind for me to follow didn't address barking dogs. His guidelines were designed for me to keep a low profile and out of the foster care system. Dad would have found the solution in his rules anyway. He stormed through life armed with a spreadsheet of all the possible alternatives. I tended to try the quickest and easiest fix. My approach seldom worked, and then I let things slide until the problem reached a tipping point. We had always been very different people.

Sometimes I wondered if we were even related. Dad and I hadn't even looked alike. He was tall—about six feet to my five foot four. His graying hair had once been a mousy brown, while my dark chestnut locks bordered on black. Dad said that my eyes looked just like my mother's—an opaque hazel with a hint of yellow. I had never seen her eyes. As I slipped into this world, she slipped out.

I switched off the engine and listened for my dog's distinctive bark. All I could hear was the whistle of the wind. I slowly raised my head to stare at the dreaded envelope that flapped in the breeze like a loose sail.

Dad would say find Shadow a new home. He would warn me that the more the authorities poked around the recently purchased house that I inherited from him, the more likely a representative from the social services agency would discover that I was underage and living alone. But even though Dad had told me enough stories about his childhood experiences with his foster parents for me to agree that living on my own was my best option, I would never give up Shadow. My one-year-old Doberman, my affectionate, sweet, goofball of a dog had an uncanny ability to sense when a meltdown was imminent. She would crawl onto my lap, lick my face, and bring me back from the brink. She was the glue holding me together. Shadow helped me cope with my impossible new life.

I threaded an arm through the strap of my purse, tucked it against my body then braced my-

from 'Between Shadow's Eyes' by Jill Hedgecock. Buy it at <https://amzn.to/3lX71BX>



PROLOGUE

Italy – Present Day

The man picked her up in Vernazza, a picturesque village perched along the rugged coastline of the Italian Riviera.

From his salt-and-pepper hair, and his lined face, Maria guessed he was in his early 50s. He bought her a drink, then dinner, then a new dress and a pair of pumps and a few other things, spending lavishly on her in the quaint village shops.

There were no pretenses. They went to his plush villa, which afforded a breathtaking view of the sea. When she asked his name, he looked at her with his brooding dark eyes and said, "Are names important, *cara*?"

All she knew was that he was a businessman from Rome. She supposed it didn't matter.

They were soon hungrily making love to each other on the king-sized bed. She hadn't expected such energy out of a man his age—he was insatiable. She often had to fake orgasms with older men, but not with this one.

They spent most of the weekend in the bedroom. In between sexual bouts, they hiked up and down the cobblestone streets of the village, admiring the view and the lovely, narrow houses that were painted in pink, blue and yellow pastels. They gorged themselves on the local cuisine—*cappon magro*, a pyramid made of fresh vegetables and a half dozen different types of fish, and the *torta pasqualina*, a cake made of 18 layers of light pasta and stuffed with *ricotta* cheese.

They spoke very little. Maria didn't care. Words might break the spell, and she didn't want this to end.



ON THE THIRD DAY, he felt that he had won the girl's trust.

The experiment he wanted to perform was far too important to delegate to one of his lieutenants. There was much riding on the outcome. He needed to see the results first hand.

But he had to be careful.

from 'Lust, Money & Murder' by Mike Wells. Buy it at <https://amzn.to/3LVGaB9>



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