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**JUNE 2024**

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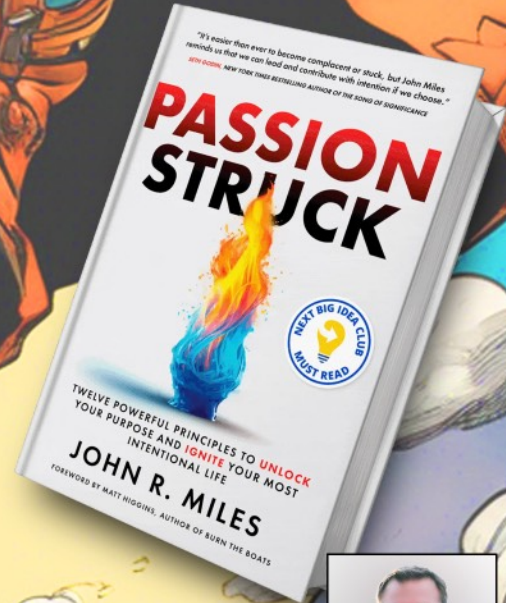
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## INKDROPS



Welcome to the June 2024 issue of Books & Pieces Magazine. This issue is available as a PDF and on our Heyzine platform where you can read it like a magazine, or download it. If you need an epub version for your Kindle or eBook reader, please email [editor@booksnpieces.com](mailto:editor@booksnpieces.com) and one will be provided. We now have VIDEO embedded in our flip-page magazine, and also on the website. This means we can share your interviews, music, artwork, and more.

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We've been doing this since 2017 and have had some well-known authors interviewed, and lots of great stories. We enjoy good stories, we enjoy writing and we enjoy the pleasure others get from reading this magazine. We try to get all submissions read within 30 days, although sometimes it takes longer when we get swamped. I wish we could elaborate on the reasons for those stories we reject. Usually, it is not about the story itself so much as the 'fit' with our magazine. If your story gets rejected please do not take it personally. And certainly do not give up. We also accept reprints.

With that said, enjoy this issue and please let us know what you think. Please share the link on your social media and tell your friends (writers, readers, artists, musicians, etc) about us.

All the best,

William Gensburger

# FACT

Your mouth produces a liter of saliva a day!



Yes, I am aware that this is a disgusting fact. Nonetheless, stop salivating over it!

# KEEPER

A Short Story by REEVE CHUDD

"Naturally, there was a catch. There's always a catch: a countervailing measure to restore the universal balance of good and bad luck in the same way that the physical universe re-establishes the balance of matter and energy. With all of Alan's great gifts and skills, one monumental shortfall hit him right between the eyes: he was dyslexic."

I was born lucky. I started out with my very own tutor for life's lessons: my big brother, Alan. I know that I'll never quite comprehend the trails he blazed to ease my path, and only when I became a parent myself did I finally gain some insight into the turmoil that he endured as he and my inexperienced parents stumbled through our family times. When I think of other animals and see the Darwinian struggle for survival that each species places upon its newborn, it gives me an even greater appreciation of the precious gift of having, on the date of one's birth, a loving, entertaining, protective playmate and friend. Alan was all of these for me, and the stories of his glorious effect upon my life are legion, but this is one of the few from the other side of the scale: how I gave back to my brother in the spring of 1960, Alan's senior year in high school.

Chronologically merely fifteen months older than I, Alan and I were so different that I actually to inquired of our poor mother how it could be possible that Alan and I shared the same sire. Of course, I wasn't stupid enough to ask our father; Mrs. Millie Edwards didn't raise any stupid children.

I was a bookworm whose best friends were bound in paper; Alan, on the other hand, was one of the most popular fellows at school. His best friend, Bobby Plant, told me that "parties don't start until Al Edwards arrives". Whereas my extensive vocabulary and wealth of useless trivia could still render a room of nitrous oxide addicts, Alan could collect smiles and laughter at a wake.

Naturally, there was a catch. There's always a catch: a countervailing measure to restore the universal balance of good and bad luck in the same way that the physical universe re-establishes the balance of matter and energy. With all of Alan's great gifts and skills, one monumental shortfall hit him right between the eyes: he was dyslexic. Before all of the educational analysts began to distinguish language-based processing disorders from the misplaced stigmas of laziness, lack of intelligence and discipline problems, Alan struggled mightily to read his homework while I breezed through mine to the evening music of Wilton Norman Chamberlain and the Philadelphia Warriors professional basketball team, with our dachshund, Louie, warming my lap. None of us, including Alan, understood his problem

then; all I knew was that my brother seemed smart enough to me, but he was just plain lousy at schoolwork.

On Saturday, April 2, 1960, Alan threw a bombshell of a revelation at me. He was afraid that he wouldn't graduate. Up to that point, in our sixteen years together, he had never shown me the slightest vestige of frailty, not a scintilla of fear; in fact, I inhaled his courage whenever we were together. Alan's mediocre academic performance never seemed to bother him greatly, even when our father lectured him about poor grades and shamefully used my own academic performance as a standard to emulate. Despite what must have been an extraordinarily stressful adolescence, Alan never showed me a moment of resentment, and this alone was the paradigm example of my good fortune of being his sibling.

That day, he came into my bedroom, took the book from my hands, and said, "Ronnie." I raised my eyes to his stare as he continued, "It's already April, and I don't have a clue what I'm going to do for a Senior thesis." What made graduation from Hannibal Hamlin High School a bit more challenging than most Philadelphia public schools of our day was the tradition of a mandatory Senior thesis, a monumental task (for a teenager) of research and presentation in a range of not less than 12 nor more than 20 single-spaced, typewritten pages. It was Alan's Everest, and he knew he was no Edmund Percival Hillary.

"I've asked everyone for ideas, and everyone has come up empty."

“Everyone, except me, you mean,” I corrected.

“It’s goddamn embarrassing, Ronnie,” his discomfort was growing with every word. “I feel so worthless asking my kid brother for help in school, and you know I never have before. You could write this thing in your sleep. But you know how much I hate schoolwork, and the thought of spending hours and hours trying to read the whole library makes me sick. Now half of my class is nearly done, and I’ve just been avoiding and avoiding and avoiding.”

Alan eventually became an extraordinarily successful salesman, primarily because he knew how to make people trust him and how to hide his subtle manipulation of his customers’ emotions. That day he revealed the promise of this skill. Not only was I hooked into my first opportunity to begin giving back to him, but also my ego was shifted into full throttle with the intellectual challenge. “Let me put my thinking cap on, Al, and I’ll come up with something good,” I assured him. The wheels were already turning.

“Your thinking cap is always on, Ron,” he replied with a soft smile and a gentle hand on my shoulder. I could feel that our brotherhood dynamic was changing.

For the rest of the weekend, I did nothing but make endless lists of objectives and possible themes for Alan’s thesis. I knew that for whatever I suggested, the subject had to provide an alternative to the vast research requirement. But it wasn’t until Monday in chemistry class that my scheming mind hit a crescendo, at the exact moment



that I sat down next to my lab partner, the dreamy Laurie Richardson.

Laurie was a fetching brunette who had dated Alan for several months before she broke off the romance because of the constant barrage of other flirtatious ladies seeking my brother's favor. Beyond the visual pleasure of Laurie's appearance, I had another motive in consenting to be her lab partner: Laurie's father was Martin Richardson who, in my opinion, was the greatest living science fiction writer on the planet, and I desperately wanted to have contact with him. I'd read every one of his books. Twice. I'd written nearly a dozen book reports on his works, listened to his infrequent interviews on the radio, and even forced my poor mother to drive me to an international science fiction convention at the Philadelphia Convention Center just so that I could meet him for a brief moment in the flesh.

So, here was the result of my epiphany: if I could get Martin Richardson to grant an interview with Alan, my brother could then do a very special Senior thesis on that author's works. Instead of an embodiment of endless research in the bowels of the library, paraphrasing scholarly commentary and doctoral ruminations, Alan's thesis would reveal its insight from the mouth of the master. The *pièce de resistance*, of course, was my alternative for Alan's reading Richardson's books: he would gain familiarity with the author's

characters and plots by way of the pithy book reports previously prepared by his baby brother.

There was, however, an interim step that required particularly devious scheming. Martin Richardson, though somewhat egomaniacal, was paradoxically reclusive. When I met him at the science fiction convention, it was his first and only public appearance in nearly two decades. Only his immediate family, his publisher, and his editor saw him with any regularity; he was never present for parent activities at school. I knew that the interview wouldn't happen without the help of Laurie, his only child, and there was only one way that she would consent to help, and that would be if she were interceding on behalf of her newly reacquired steady boyfriend. I had to cajole my disgustingly popular brother to drop his enviable harem of ladies in favor of retrieving a girlfriend who had embarrassingly discarded him.

So, the very next day in the chemistry lab, I said to my delicious partner, "Laurie, has Al called you recently? You seem to have become his favorite subject."

Her eyes and mouth opened simultaneously. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, every time I'm talking with my brother these days, he's always telling me what a lucky stiff I am to sit next to you in class, and how he let the 'real thing' get away, and how this girl or that girl

is nothing compared to you, and how he knows that you'll never be interested in him again, and how...."

"Really?" she interrupted, as her shock slowly converted to one of obviously restrained elation.

"What? Am I the only one he makes sick with that stuff?" I continued. "He told me that you make him happy whenever he looks at you and that he's not going to the Senior Prom if he can't take you."

Her silent Mona Lisa grin told me that one-half of the first step in my quest was complete. So, I proceeded with the other side of the plan.

That night Alan came home from Varsity Baseball practice, and I strolled into his bedroom. "Hey, Al," I said nonchalantly, "can I ask you a huge favor?"

"Sure, Ronnie. Name it."

"Will you please go out with Laurie Richardson again so that she'll stop wasting chemistry lab time worshiping you?"

"What the hell are you saying, Ron? Laurie dumped me months ago."

"Yeah, and I've been hearing her regret it ever since. I know that she picked me as her lab partner so that she could get back with you. All she does in lab is ask about what you're up to, and talk about how great you are to be with, that you're the funniest guy she's ever known, how she loves to listen to you, how she'll never find anyone

as good as you, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah....get me the barf bag, pu-u-u-l-l-lease.”

“Come on, Ron. You know Laurie and I are ancient history. I’ll bet that she’s making a play for you and that she’s just trying to make you jealous.”

“Believe what you want. She told me she’d only go to your stupid Senior Prom if she could go with you. Just do me a favor: pay some attention to her so that she’ll pay some attention to our lab reports. I’m sick of her doing nothing but stare into the ‘middle distance’ and sigh all the time.” I imitated Laurie pining for Alan.

“Look,” said my brother, “if it’ll make you happy, I’ll talk to her when I see her tomorrow.”

“Bless you, Al. I won’t forget the favor.”

My work bringing Alan and Laurie back together was, quite possibly, the most successful and shameful scheme I would ever accomplish. The next day, Alan ran into Laurie during a period break, and they decided to walk home together from school. According to Al, Laurie practically threw herself at him, and my helpless brother asked her to be his Prom date. The following morning, the entire populace of Hannibal Hamlin High School was singing of the rekindling of the Richardson-Edwards romance.

Decades later, my brother would explain to me how this early manipulation of his emotions was a prime example of my own

potential in a career in sales, and how my less-than-lucrative academic career had wasted my true talents.

Nearly two weeks after this masterpiece of matchmaking, after Alan and Laurie had experienced what I would call a “bonding”



weekend together, indulging in the “Great American Pastime” in our father’s Buick Electra 225 (or, as Al called it, the “Deuce-and-a-Quarter”), I came to his room to suggest my plan for his Senior thesis.

By this time, Al was so desperate to find a solution to his dilemma that he listened intently,

even though, once I revealed my plan for his thesis, I noted in his tone of voice a sneaking suspicion that his reunion with Laurie was indeed an intentional preface to my plan for him. To get to the next step, he would have to become my co-conspirator and utilize his own god-given salesmanship on an unsuspecting but strongly reluctant mark, Laurie’s father.

First, I innocently invited Laurie over to our house for dinner, under the pretense that, after dinner, we could finish our most recent lab report together. She was already hooked (actually, re-hooked) on Al, so it was a piece of cake to reel her in (to exhaust a metaphor) with an offer to reconnect with our family. My mother was the greatest cook in the world, and Mom loved to perform for guests, so the dinner went splendidly (and, as an intended consequence of my advance pleading, Dad even refrained from belching at the table or asking embarrassing questions).

When Alan and Laurie had dated previously, she'd had precious little contact with our parents. But the stakes were higher now, and it was just as important for Laurie to feel comfortable with our parents as it was for them to approve of her. So, I took it upon myself to ensure the dinner conversation was absolutely bouncy. That afternoon, I compiled a list of current topics, including Sputnik and the space program, the Phillies, Nikita Khrushchev, the recent statehood of Alaska and Hawaii, Vice President Nixon's prospects in the upcoming election, the Twist, and Mattel's new Barbie doll. My goal was to have the banter sail through dessert, and Alan deftly punctuated the discussion with humor, much to the pleasure of our parents and Laurie.

I'd already completed the lab report before Laurie arrived, so that, following dinner, I asked her to give my work a once-over (and, to her credit, she found a typographical error), and that left plenty of

time in the young evening for Al and his girl to enjoy the spring sunset on the front porch. According to plan, Al was to use this opportunity to extract from Laurie a reciprocating dinner invitation.

From my bedroom overlooking the happy couple, I eavesdropped to hear my brother at work:

“That was delicious,” said Laurie. “I wish that my mother could cook like yours.”

“Mom could run a restaurant; no sweat. Isn’t your mother a good cook?”

“She tries,” said Laurie, “but she’s not in the same league as yours.”

“Don’t worry, Laurie, I won’t think less of you or your mother if neither of you can cook like Mom. I really like your parents; they were very nice to me when we were going together before. Now that we’re back together, it would be nice if I could see them again.”

In those days, telling a girl with whom you’d shared the back seat of the Deuce-and-a-Quarter that you were prepared to meet her parents had to be the equivalent of the words “Ring by Spring”. And even though both my brother and Laurie were still in high school, this statement by Alan was nevertheless a strong implication of commitment.

“Let’s call Mom right now and arrange for a dinner at my house,” she blurted out as she tried to rise to return inside for the house phone. Alan interrupted her by gently grabbing her arm.

“There’s something else I need to tell you, but I have to say first that it has absolutely nothing to do with us getting back together, and it’s very important to me that you know that we were meant for each other in the first place and that you were the one who broke us up the last time.”

Laurie sat back down slowly with concern in her voice. “What is it, Al?” she whispered.

“Well, it’s about school, really. You know that I have to write a Senior thesis so I can graduate, right?”

Laurie nodded.

“Well, because Ron and I are big fans of your dad, I was thinking of doing my thesis on him. I’d like to ask him if that’s okay with him. It has nothing to do with us, the Prom, nothing.”

Laurie sighed in relief. At that moment I wished that I could read her mind to discover what horrible revelation she’d imagined would be coming from my brother. She had obviously believed his romantic introduction and, by this time, Alan’s heart had transcended my matchmaking merriment, and his statements were his true feelings.

Alan turned toward her and said, “I know that this is asking a lot, but if the dinner with your folks is a “go”, would it be okay if Ron tags along? He’s the one who turned me on to your Dad’s books”

Now Laurie rose with relief and delight. She wasn’t about to let this small distraction spoil her moment. “You can bring the Seventh Fleet if you want.”



Friday night, April 22, was the date chosen. Fortunately, Al's high school baseball team didn't play until the following week. So, my brother and I embarked upon intensive training. I took the cardboard backings from our father's folded, laundered shirts and made flashcards, with one side having the title of a book or short story and the other side with a one-sentence synopsis of the story's plot. I read each of my Richardson book reports out loud to Alan. I even invented a game I called "Three Great Things", in which I would feed Alan a title, and he would have to make three comments about the book or story which would be certain to convey that he'd read it with enjoyment.

And as if that wasn't enough preparation, I added something special: my brother the baseball player was going to get secret signals from me. I devised a short set of hand, shoulder, and facial signals that I could send to Alan if the going got rough. For example, if I thought he wasn't making sense, I'd use my left index finger to rub my right eyebrow. If I thought Al was "on the money" and should pursue the direction his conversation had taken, I'd rub my right pinky at the corner of my mouth, and so on. He loved this clandestine communication; it was just like being in the batter's box and receiving instructions from his third base coach.

I even laid out a mock dinner where I played, simultaneously, the author, his wife, his younger brother Tony (who lived with them since he returned from Korea without his right leg), and Laurie.

On Tuesday evening, Alan interrupted our training session with a fit of conscience. “I know you’ve got this all planned out, Ron, but I’m starting to feel like a big, fat cheater.”

“Oh, come on, Al,” I assured him. “Don’t you think your classmates are plagiarizing to get their thesis done? What about the people reading Cliff Notes instead of the actual books? How many of them are really, truly doing the work on their own, without help from their parents and brothers and sisters?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied. “I just feel lousy about how we’re going about this. I can’t tell this guy that I’ve read all of his books and stories.”

I could see from his expression that I needed to negotiate a compromise. “What if, by Friday night, you read one Richardson book, so that at least you can tell him that you’ve read ‘some of his work’”

“Well,” he smiled, “at least then I wouldn’t be a total liar.”

I didn’t delay in selecting the book. I chose my own favorite, *My Brother’s Keeper*. That book was about twin brothers in the future who volunteer for a neurological experiment which successfully transplants the mind of one brother (whose body is suffering from a terminal illness) into the active mind of the healthy other, so that they both inhabit a single consciousness and body, with predictably disastrous results. The process is irreversible, and the body of the visiting brother is donated for organ transplants, but in the end, the

visiting brother's consciousness becomes too great a threat to the sanity of the host brother, and this conflict begins to have physical manifestations. So, the visiting brother sacrifices himself, essentially erasing his mind from the brain of his host brother, in order to allow the host brother to survive. I loved the prose, the subconscious dialogue of the brothers (who now literally read each other's minds), and the personality development of the brothers in tandem; it was a story of the ultimate empathy and the ultimate sacrifice.

Alan started reading the book that night, and in addition to his reading, I read passages to him when his eyes grew tired. While we had fun throughout all of our preparation, neither Alan nor I knew if we had any chance of success. I started to worry that I might fail my brother.

On Friday, Al and I went straight home from school, showered and got into our nicer clothes, and then set out for Laurie's house, practicing all the way. When we finally arrived, I hesitated when I reached for the doorbell and looked at my brother. Al smiled and said, "Here goes nothin', Ronnie," and courageously rang the bell.

Laurie let us in and brought us to the living room, where Mr. Richardson was seated, sipping a cocktail. He rose to shake our hands.

"Alan, I'm happy to see you again. And your brother, Ronald who, Laurie tells me, is a chemistry whiz." He smiled at me as he shook my hand with approval. I smiled back.

“Sir,” answered Alan, “I hope you don’t mind that I asked Laurie if Ron could ‘come with.’ You see, it was Ron who introduced me to your writings, and I just didn’t think it would be fair if I got to see you again and he didn’t.”

“As I recall,” Mr. Richardson replied, “I met your brother at the Convention Center a couple of summers ago.”

“Gosh, Mr. Richardson, you remember me from then?” I blurted.

“Yes, of course, Ronald. Your mother brought you, I believe. You were the youngest person there, as far as I could tell.”

I was overwhelmed at having been noticed by this “god.” I suddenly lost all semblance of ability to carry on any intelligent banter. Fortunately, from the kitchen came Mrs. Richardson’s call “Dinner, everyone”, and we turned in unison to adjourn to the dining room. Midway there, we were met by Tony, who sported an artificial leg and a significant limp, supported by a cane, and Mr. Richardson introduced us. Tony was the first person we’d ever met who had lost a limb in the service of our country, and Alan and I were nearly brought to tears by looking at his stiff and dragging prosthesis. Tony saw the effect that his injury was having upon Alan, and he put his arm around my brother and said, “If you let me lean on you, sport, I can get to the dining room without this stick.” That small splash of warmth stayed Alan’s and my deluge, and Tony dropped his cane, put his arm around Alan and hobbled to the table with a smile.

Alan would later refer to the meal as the Forever Pot Roast because it repeated on him for days. How Laurie's mother tortured that food will remain a mystery, but my brother and I agreed that it tasted burnt the first time it touched our lips and each and every time it came back up. A short pause came in the dinner conversation while dessert and coffee were being consumed, and I drew my napkin to my lips and wiped my mouth to signal my brother that the moment of truth had arrived. Alan lightly scratched the right side of his face: the reply sign to acknowledge "Message received".

"Mr. Richardson, you know that seniors at Hamlin High have to do a Senior thesis to graduate, right?"

"Yes, Alan. I'm aware of that. In fact, we're taking Laurie to New York this summer so that she can visit Ellis Island. She's thinking of doing her thesis next year on Mrs. Richardson's family, who emigrated from Belgium."

"Oh...um... great." Alan shot Laurie a nervous smile. "I'll be interested in reading that, Laurie." He paused and looked down at the table, then lifted his head and continued. "Actually, Mr. Richardson, the reason I brought up the subject of my Senior thesis is that, well, I hope you won't be mad at me, but I wanted to ask your permission to do my Senior thesis on your books and stories."

Silence filled the dining room, and the Richardson clan uniformly stared at my brother. Finally, Tony cleared the air. "How about that,

Marty, you've hit the big tent, the center ring; you're now the stuff that legends are made of."

I just couldn't read Mr. Richardson's reaction. He seemed so calm, so self-possessed in his stare. Finally, he asked Alan: "Why would you want to have me as your subject, Alan? Frankly, science fiction writers don't win Pulitzer Prizes. We're hardly what the world calls 'artists.' Why not Hemingway or Hawthorne or Fitzgerald?"

"Because I like your work, Mr. Richardson. If I have to read a lot for this thesis, I'd rather have a good time doing it. And I have a good time reading your books."

Mr. Richardson pursed his lips, obviously annoyed. "I don't think that I'm an appropriate subject for a Senior thesis, Alan. I hope you'll forgive me, but I'd truly rather you didn't."

It was then that Laurie came to the rescue of her man. "Daddy," she whined, "Alan is paying you a great compliment. I wish you'd think about it before you decide." Well played, Laurie, I thought, how can he refuse 'Daddy's little girl'.

After another silent pause, Mr. Richardson stared at Laurie, then began to speak as he slowly turned his gaze to Alan. To me, the author looked as if he were telling his daughter: All right, sweetie, let me show you how vacuous your jock boyfriend can be.

"Tell me, Alan, which among my books you've read thus far is your favorite?"

Okay, Al, you were right, I thought. You can tell me "I told you so".

“That’s easy, Sir. I thought *My Brother’s Keeper* was wonderful.” I grew calm. It was readily apparent that Alan was confident enough to use my “Three Great Things” for this book, but what came from Alan after that was spontaneous and, I might add, infinitely more insightful than anything I’d ever told him.

“And why did you enjoy *My Brother’s Keeper*?” asked Mr. Richardson.

“Because you really know what it is to have a brother, to be a brother. I felt every word of your story. Only a brother could write that story, and no one could have written about that better than you did.” Alan looked from Mr. Richardson to Tony, and they in turn looked at me and at each other. Mrs. Richardson held her hand over her mouth to stifle either a laugh or a sob; I couldn’t tell. I remember holding my breath because I didn’t know what else to do.

At length, the mouth of Martin Richardson curled into a soft smile, and he looked sweetly at Laurie, and then to my brother, “Alan, I would be honored if you would write your Senior thesis about me.”

Laurie gave her father her visual approval. “And I’ll do better than that.” he continued. “You tell me what you think of each book of mine that you read, and I’ll tell whether you’ve captured what I was trying to say or not. How about that?”

Owing to his success in his own analysis of one book, Alan revamped our plan to include his plowing through nine books and fifteen short stories. In order to prevent his bias from my own

analysis, he refused to re-read my book reports until after he'd finished reading each book and discussing it with me. We swore off television, listening to basketball games, playing together, and everything else except that Alan didn't give up his Friday night baseball and Saturday night dates with Laurie; aside from that, we were sharply focused on preparation for his meetings with Mr. Richardson.

Because I'd not previously discussed literary works with Alan, I'd had no

direct experience with his intellect, possibly because his academic performance never provided overwhelming evidence of his mental talents. But what I discovered at our dinner at Laurie's house and revealed in detail during our subsequent analytical discussions was something so basic that I was ashamed not to have truly noticed it before: Alan was truly an insightful guy. My immaturity restricted my assessment to my standards, but while I was methodical and organized in my perception, Alan was intuitive and sentimental. He saw many important aspects of Richardson's works that my cold, calculated vision missed.

The integration of our thoughts, however, forged some astounding results when we created our list of questions for each of the interviews with Mr. Richardson, and the author was pleasingly impressed with the experience, even more than he had been at our initial dinner meeting. Alan graciously insisted that I be present for



his discussions with Mr. Richardson, and I accompanied him for all but one; the last one conflicting with my trip to Harrisburg to participate in Hamlin High's unsuccessful run in the state debate team tournament.

Sometimes these meetings would be at the Richardson residence, and at other times, the author would walk along with us in the local park for an hour or so. For each of these discussions that I attended, I focused most upon remaining a minor player, letting Alan run the interview.

At the first meeting, walking in the local park, Alan began to discuss *A Patient Made to Order*, Richardson's novella about a high-priced sanitarium, where the physicians added fake patients who were actually human-like androids created for the purpose of interacting and engaging with the real human patients. The project was well-intentioned: the physicians wanted to see if the less social patients would become more active and comfortable if they each had a special friend who would do anything they asked and listen to them faithfully. In the story, the experiment produces unexpected results: the real patients become happier and more confident in the confines of the sanitarium, but when they are released into the real world, they are completely overwhelmed, simply because in life one rarely acquires such selfless partners, other than the paid ones.

Alan began the discussion with one of our scripted interview questions. All of his questions were scribbled in his spiral notebook,

which he carried throughout his meetings with the author. “I’ve noticed that a recurring theme in your work is the message that technology’s promise is hollow, that machines can’t truly improve our lives.”

Mr. Richardson continued walking as he stroked his chin in contemplation. “There is another author (perhaps you’ve heard of him), Ray Bradbury, whose works and whose real-life choices reflect a very strong distrust of machines. But that’s not exactly where I’m going with this story.”

Alan continued, “Then, is your message that we need to find human solutions to our problems before we try to create the machines, that we can’t make the right machines unless we already understand the solutions in human terms?”

“That’s more like it,” Mr. Richardson smiled. “In other words, my theme is not unlike one that was much more delicately written in *The Wizard of Oz*: that our dreams cannot be attained merely with purely mechanical or magical solutions because, in the end, there’s a human being behind the curtain. What do you think of that, Ronald?”

“Gee, Mr. Richardson,” I turned toward him, showing surprise to be included in the discussion. “I figured that you were sending a message that the androids were just like shrinks, that all they do is give a patient fake confidence and listen intently and never, ever talk about themselves or their problems. But in the real world, your

friends aren't like that. I guess I missed the other part. Maybe I should read it again."

"Well, I'll be damned," the author shrugged. "Just a week ago, a classmate of mine from Penn who has become a psychiatrist told me that "Patient" was a testament to my distrust of psychotherapy. Thank you, Ronald; maybe I should read it again."

What a pair of actors the Edwards brothers turned out to be. Some of Alan's interview questions were extracted from my book reports, but my response at this first interview had come from Alan's comments after he read "Patient". The role reversal was sweet, and on the walk home, Alan and I laughed and laughed at how well we portrayed each other.

And that was how each interview went. Alan provided his scripted questions, and on the few occasions when Mr. Richardson asked me for my comments, I would dutifully oblige with a much less rarified and more mundane but rational approach, invariably from something that originated from my brother's independent analysis. Martin Richardson never once let on that he saw through our role-playing subterfuge, and it was readily apparent that he liked the different perspective that I (in other words, Alan) added.

After I returned from Harrisburg, I ran up to Alan's room to ask about the fifth and final interview, which I'd missed. "So, Al, how'd it go?" I inquired with great anticipation.

“It went fine,” he said, almost dejectedly, “but I think he really missed you. There was a point where he said, ‘I wish your brother were here to give us his fresh perspective.’”

It hit me like a lead pipe. “Al,” I exclaimed, “do you realize what that means?”

“What? That he likes you better than me?”

“No, no, no! He likes you, Al. I’m the one who parrots your comments and your analysis at the interviews. I’m certain that my true take on his works is much more conventional and that lots of other people have asked him the same interview questions you ask. But the stuff that I contribute to the interview, your stuff, now that’s something that’s really new to him; it’s a ‘fresh perspective.’ He thinks you’re the cool one, Al.”

“Hm...” said my big brother with a renewed smile, “I hope you’re right.”

Alan and I wrote his thesis together, creating what I would consider the perfect consolidation of our joint analysis of the works Alan had read and discussed, peppered with the author’s own words. I can’t say it was a masterpiece because Al got a B minus grade for it, but he graduated from Hamlin High just the same after being elected Senior Class president.

Alan never went to college; he went right into selling real estate and started amassing his fortune. Laurie and I graduated the following year, and I did my Senior thesis on unsung brothers of famous men,

such as President Eisenhower's brother, Milton, and Edwin Booth, the famed actor brother of the assassin John. And, when Laurie graduated from Temple University four years after she and I left Hamlin High, she was wearing a wedding band with this inscription:

"I love you. Al-ways"

At their wedding reception, Martin Richardson handed me a wrapped gift. "I'll put it with the rest of the gifts, Mr. Richardson," I told him.

"No, Ronald," he said, "this gift is for you. I hope that someday you'll try your hand at writing. I know that you have the talent."

"That's really nice of you to say that, Sir. Congratulations to both of us." I raised my champagne flute to him as he smiled and moved on.

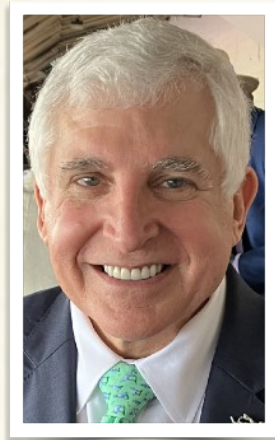
I exited the reception room with my gift and tore off the wrapping. What I held was a first edition of my favorite Martin Richardson book. I opened the front cover to read the inscription:

To Ronald Edwards:

Thank you for being your brother's keeper.

Fondly, Martin Richardson.

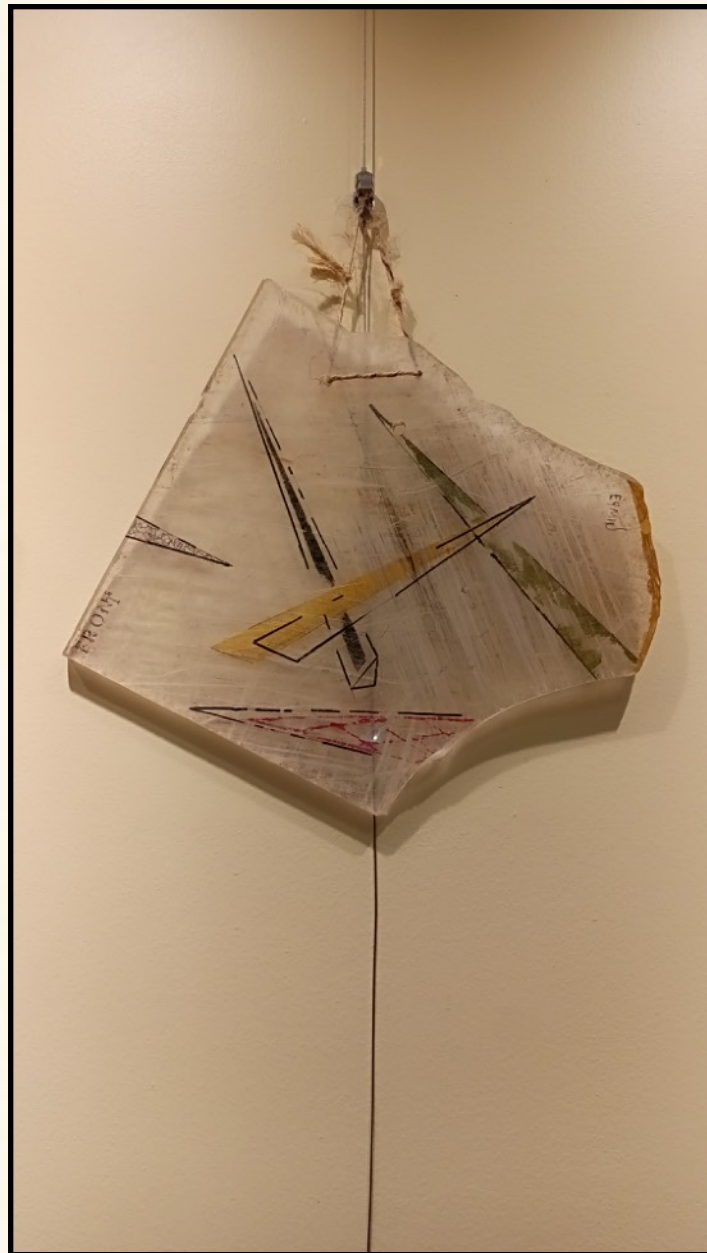
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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Reeve Chudd is a retired trusts and estates lawyer from Los Angeles who recently moved to the Indianapolis area. He always wanted to write fiction but also liked to eat regularly. By his own admissions, his academic degrees and \$4.55 will now procure him a grande latte at Starbucks.

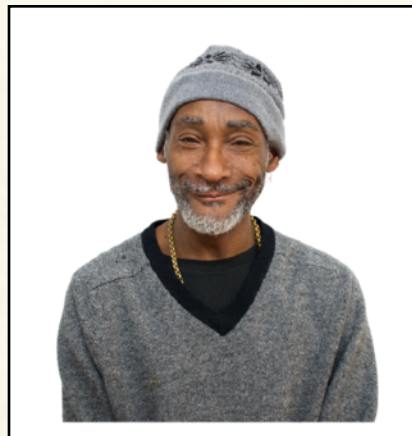
# ARTWORK

by Edwin Lockridge



**HOMELESS, VISUAL ARTIST TAKES AUTO INDUSTRY BY STORM!**

Edwin is the founding father of an art form,



## 2024 -2025, REDEFINING REMNANTS

Exhibit at LANE MOTOR MUSEUM in  
Nashville, Tennessee.

He writes: “I created a new art form and bits and pieces go into my art. I'm the founding father of this art form and it is one of my greatest achievements. And it also looks good on my resume.”

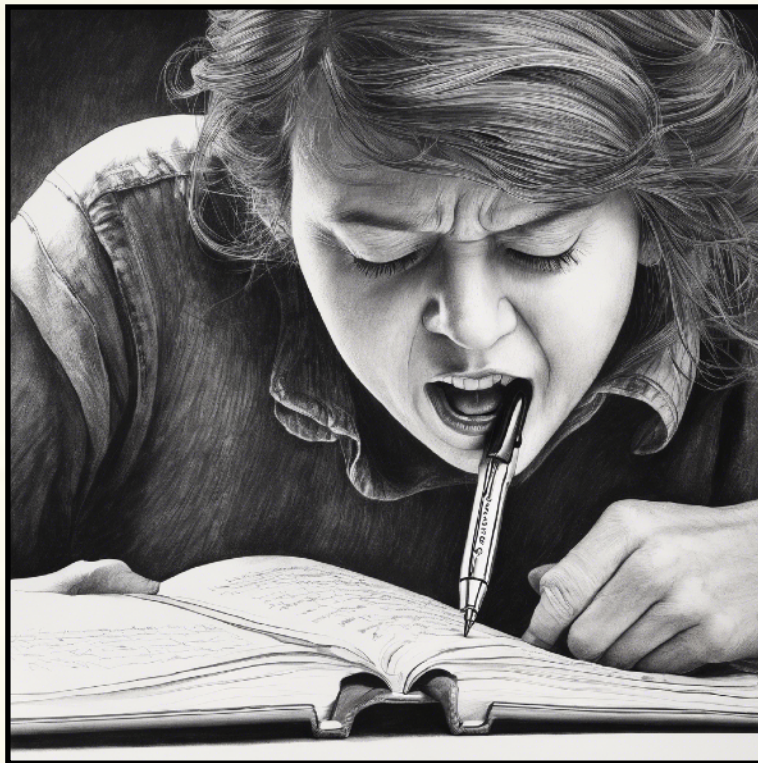
You can see more of his works and learn more about him at  
<https://daybreakarts.org/meet-edwin-lockridge>



# FACT: **Death by Ballpoint Pen**

This is not the premise of a murder mystery novel, although it well could be. Did you know that on average...

**100 people choke to death on  
ballpoint pens each year?**

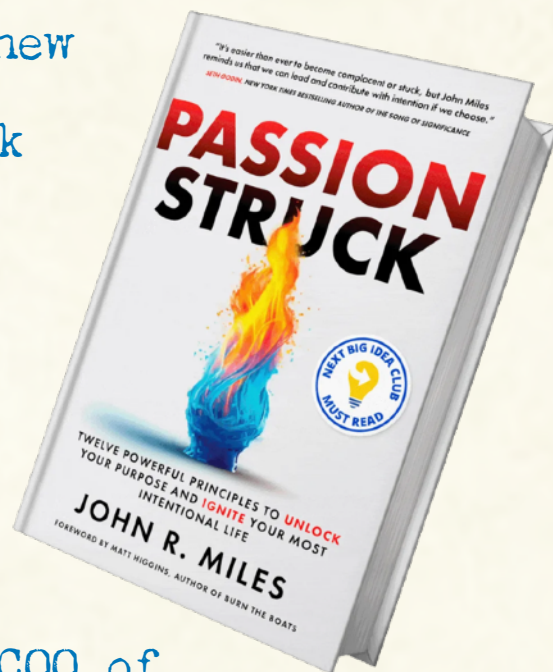


Now you know. And that's why I use a fountain pen! 😊

# JOHN R. MILES

## An Interview

John is the author of the new book 'Passion Struck: Twelve Powerful Principles to Unlock Your Purpose and Ignite Your Most Intentional Life' (Post Hill Press), which combines behavior science research, peak performance strategies, and compelling real-life narratives from industry titans (Oprah, Elon Musk, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Astronaut Wendy Lawrence, General Stanley McChrystal, COO of Lowe's Larry Stone) - many who John has had the privilege to interview and/or work with - to empower you to confront and transcend your limiting beliefs, ultimately paving the way for an existence without boundaries.



*Are you living intentionally, with purpose and passion? Are you embracing the flame that ignites within you, or are you evading it? Will your future self be proud of your story, or do you yearn for something more?*

*We all have personal limits that apply to different areas of our lives, such as creating abundance, making changes to our health or body, overcoming recurring patterns of self-sabotage, or simply believing in ourselves. However, we can tap into our unlimited potential when we push ourselves beyond these limitations. Once we let go of our doubts, we can begin to have faith in our new life. By intentionally acting as if it's attainable, we can gradually transform into the embodiment of that belief.*



*Q: Your background is interesting and diverse. From a career in the military through an injury that made you rethink your priorities, as well as how to implement them, you have formulated an understanding of the things that hold us back from success and offer a guide to overcoming the obstacles. Without suggesting less of your approach, self-discovery, and revelation, the quest for betterment is not new. How do you believe that your approach is different, and why?*

A: "Passion Struck" fundamentally differs from other self-help and personal mastery books by uniquely combining the science of intentional living with the concept of mattering. It delivers an actionable and transformative guide that readers can actively live by.

When I set out to write "Passion Struck," I aimed to create a resource that was not only informative but also deeply practical and inspiring. My approach is rooted in my diverse experiences—both the highs and the lows.

My career as a U.S. Navy officer taught me the value of discipline and leadership, but it was my traumatic brain injury (TBI) sustained in combat and the harrowing experience of confronting an in-home intruder at gunpoint that reshaped my understanding of resilience and purpose. These experiences forced me to confront and overcome significant obstacles, as well as trauma, instilling in me a profound understanding of human potential.



What sets "Passion Struck" apart is its foundation in rigorous, cutting-edge research from behavior science, psychology, and neuroscience. Each principle in the book is backed by this research, ensuring that the strategies presented are not just effective but scientifically proven. This differentiates my book from others that may rely more on anecdotal advice or motivational rhetoric without a solid scientific basis.

I weave together groundbreaking evidence, surprising insights, and vivid storytelling, taking readers on a journey from the classroom to the boardroom, the battlefield to the White House, and from the wrestling ring to outer space. This narrative approach makes the content relatable and engaging, actionable, providing readers with real-life applications and steps.

By combining scientific rigor with compelling personal stories and practical advice, "Passion Struck" offers a holistic and integrated approach to personal transformation. Each chapter provides clear, actionable steps, ensuring that readers can implement the concepts in their daily lives. This practical focus is what makes my approach stand out—it's about providing a blueprint for real, lasting change, not just temporary motivation, making it a vital resource for anyone looking to make their life truly matter.

*Q: You were in the Navy. The rigors of military life simplify the notions of self to that of duty and obligation, do they not? What prompted you to alter the path you chose, and what were the conflicts you felt during this transition?*



A: William, I've found that life is all about reinvention.

Military life deeply instills the values of duty, honor, courage, discipline, and obligation. These principles are fundamental to the structure and success of any military career, and they became a core part of who I was. They are still incredibly important to me, and I've learned that I can uphold these values while living a different, more adaptive life.

When I left the military, I had been selected to attend the FBI academy at Quantico. However, due to Congress' failure to pass a budget, my class was recycled, forcing me to chart a new course. This unexpected twist led me to excel in a different direction, eventually becoming a Fortune 50 CIO, CSO, CDO, and a veteran CEO. This was a path I never dreamed of as a child, and I fell into the trap of leading a linear life—the type society often dictates we should live.

Despite these achievements, I realized I was living according to someone else's ideals, not my own. This realization hit hard: I was

living inauthentically and in a state of quiet desperation, making others' dreams come true while neglecting my own. This inner conflict pushed me to explore what it truly means to live a life of significance and intentionality.

The transition was challenging but necessary. I had to cross the chasm from my 'ought' self—who I thought I should be—to my 'ideal' self—who I truly wanted to be. During this journey, I faced intense internal conflicts. I had to confront my fears, let go of societal expectations, and redefine success on my own terms. This process of self-discovery and transformation is ongoing and inspired me to write "Passion Struck."

Many of us fall into the trap of living a linear life, adhering to a conventional path: study hard, work diligently, and secure a well-paid, relatively safe job. While these steps offer certain benefits, they often lead to unhappiness if we find ourselves in jobs we don't enjoy or feel unfulfilled by societal milestones.

A linear life measures success by rigid guidelines that fail to account for life's unpredictability. In contrast, living an adaptive life means embracing each day as though it's our last—not by abandoning responsibilities, but by balancing every aspect of our lives while ensuring our actions align with our ambitions and aspirations. Living an adaptive life allows us to be present, expect, and embrace change while upholding the values of duty, honor, courage, discipline, and obligation. We shouldn't let our jobs



consume us; we shouldn't equate money with happiness; we shouldn't fear changing career paths; and we shouldn't settle for relationships out of societal pressure.

*Q: You've done a lot of podcasts and have received a lot of endorsements from a wide variety of people. Public speaking and podcasting are similar in approach. Crafting a book, in this case, 'Passion Struck,' is a different beast. How much of the book did you write yourself, and how did you find the process of putting it all together?*

A: I wrote the entirety of "Passion Struck" myself, and the process required a dedicated, habitual approach to writing and researching. Unlike podcasting and keynotes, where the engagement is immediate and interactive, writing a book demands a deeper, more structured exploration of the topics. I set aside specific times each day to focus on crafting the book, ensuring that the content was digestible and approachable for readers without being too heavy on the science.

In many ways, the writing process for "Passion Struck" mirrored how I prepare for my solo podcast episodes. For these episodes, I meticulously script each one, telling captivating stories with clear lessons for the listener. This storytelling approach played a key role in the book as well. I aimed to weave in personal experiences and vivid examples from others to illustrate the principles, making them more relatable and engaging.

My goal was to make the book approachable for the reader. I chose metaphors and fun names for the chapter headings to help readers remember the content. By combining rigorous research with engaging stories, I created a book that is both informative and inspiring, providing clear, actionable steps to live a life of significance and intentionality.



*Q: What was your approach to the daily grind of writing, plotting, editing, etc? Hand notes, computer, etc?*

A: My approach to the daily grind of writing, plotting, and editing "Passion Struck" was a blend of disciplined structure and creative



inspiration. I primarily used my computer for drafting and organizing, but I also relied heavily on handwritten notes to capture spontaneous ideas and brainstorm.

I'm a firm believer in the power of meditation and walks to clear the mind and refine ideas. These practices were crucial for thinking through each chapter's approach, allowing me to maintain focus and creativity.



Over seven years, I conducted extensive research, studying 750 different leaders who embarked on their own passion-struck journeys. This research was the backbone of my book. The challenge was to distill these insights into a coherent and

impactful narrative. To do this, I developed a comprehensive model based on mindset shifts, behavior shifts, and the psychology of progress (deliberate action and intrinsic motivation).

These elements are designed to help readers break free from the constraints of fear and doubt, leveraging insights from some of the

world's most successful individuals, such as Oprah Winfrey, General McChrystal, and Jeff Bezos.

As I completed major sections of the book, it became clear that readers needed a guide to understanding their journey to becoming passion-struck. This realization led to the creation of a chapter defining the stages of subsister, imitator, vanquisher, orchestrator, and creative amplifier. These stages provide readers with a clear framework to identify where they are and the steps needed to advance.

By combining rigorous research with practical, actionable steps and a clear, engaging structure, I aimed to craft a book that is not only informative but also transformative.

*Q: How long did it take you to complete the first full draft?*

A: The initial draft of "Passion Struck" took about 9 months to complete. Following this, I went through over 15 edits to refine and perfect the manuscript before sending it to the publisher. The publishing process itself took another 14 months and involved 6 to 7 rounds of extensive edits and rewrites.

During this time, my work on the podcast had a direct impact on the book. As I was editing chapters, I was able to incorporate more science, practical examples, and research drawn from the insights of my podcast guests. This enriched the content and ensured that each

chapter was not only theoretically sound but also grounded in real-world applications. The rigorous editing and integration of these elements allowed me to create a final product that is polished, impactful, and truly reflective of the principles and insights I wanted to share.

*Q: Your explanation of 'human mosquitoes,' or energy vampires, people among us that negatively affect our lives by draining energy and time-wasting, is a concept most people do not recognize. Having been taught by society to be all accepting, how do you convince someone that this actually happens, and what do you suggest they do about it?*

A: Absolutely, William. The entire idea for this chapter came to me during a meditative walk where I was reflecting on the invisible influences in our lives. I was struck by a radio announcer's question about the most dangerous animal on the planet. The answer was the unlikely mosquito. Just as mosquitoes can invisibly affect us but inflict significant harm, human mosquitoes in our lives can do the same, often without us even realizing it.

Adverse relationships can deeply impact our psyche, shaping our self-esteem and influencing decision-making processes. This influence frequently results in heightened stress levels and a compromised sense of personal and professional fulfillment. Such relationships foster a toxic environment, entangling us in negative thought patterns

and behaviors, ultimately impeding our growth and limiting our potential.

Convincing someone that human mosquitoes exist starts with drawing parallels to the familiar. Everyone has experienced moments of unexplained fatigue or frustration, often after interacting with certain people. These interactions are disheartening and utterly exhausting. By highlighting this common experience, people begin to see how certain individuals, often those closest to us, can subtly and persistently drain our energy.

Research supports the prevalence and impact of these negative influences. Leadership development company Fierce Inc. found that four out of five employees have worked alongside a toxic coworker. Additionally, workplace consultancy Randstad revealed that 58% of employees have left or are considering leaving their jobs due to negativity, office politics, and disrespectful behavior. A 2023 Pepperdine University report showed that 68% of employees believe office politics are prevalent, with 29% feeling it hinders their career progression. Nearly 40% would contemplate leaving a job due to internal politics.

To address human mosquitoes, it's crucial to:

- Recognize the Signs: Identify negative outlooks, boundary overstepping, emotional exhaustion, and lack of reciprocity in interactions.

- **Protect Yourself:** Understand personal limits, communicate boundaries clearly, enforce them consistently, prioritize self-care, seek support when needed, and adjust boundaries as circumstances evolve.

By implementing these steps, individuals can shield themselves from draining influences and cultivate a life aligned with their values and aspirations. Transitioning away from toxicity paves the path for growth, ease, and purposeful living, surrounded by supportive and energizing connections.

*Q: . Are you planning more books in the future?*

A: Yes, I am indeed planning more books in the future. I've already created the structure and approach for three additional topics that I'm excited to write about. While my current focus is on continuing to promote "Passion Struck," I'm eager to pursue these new projects when the time is right. Writing "Passion Struck" has been an incredibly rewarding experience, and I'm looking forward to diving deeper into these new areas to provide even more valuable insights and guidance for my readers.

*Q: Can you tell us a little about your personal life, what brings you the most happiness, anything you can share?*

A: Absolutely, I'd love to share a bit about my personal life and what brings me the most happiness. To me, happiness is all about the

little things—those everyday moments that bring joy and fulfillment. Early morning walks with my dog, Bentley, are a constant source of happiness and companionship. Sunsets with my loved ones, including my fiancée Cori, bring immense joy as we navigate life's challenges and celebrate its blessings together.

Family is incredibly important to me. I have two wonderful kids who add so much love and purpose to my life. The recent loss of my sister to pancreatic cancer has deeply underscored the importance of cherishing every moment and valuing our time together. This tragedy has made me even more committed to living intentionally and appreciating the preciousness of life.

My relationship with God, personal time for self-introspection, and daily exercise are also vital parts of my happiness. Maintaining a healthy circadian rhythm helps keep me energized and focused,

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM *PASSION STRUCK*

- In a world dominated by the pressures of social media and the competitive professional landscape, *Passion Struck* encourages individuals to rise above self-doubt, embrace their potential, and live intentionally.
- Intentionality is not merely about achieving goals; it's about purposeful action that helps individuals conquer life's challenges.
- The *Passion Struck* toolkit for elite performance includes twelve empowering steps, enabling readers to navigate decision-making, problem-solving, failure, innovation, change, boundaries, and leadership.
- We should embrace discomfort, take bold risks, pursue dreams fearlessly, and overcome self-doubt. The mindset extends beyond the corporate world, highlighting its relevance for personal growth and success.
- *Passion Struck* challenges the notion that success is limited to CEOs and billionaires. It advocates for tapping into intrinsic drivers, moving away from external sources of motivation. By aligning these drivers and fine-tuning personal systems, individuals can harness their restlessness as a driving force for success.
- By aligning mindset and behavior with a purpose-driven life, anyone can unlock their potential and create a life of significance.

allowing me to prioritize my physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health. These practices reflect what I preach on my podcast and are essential for leading a balanced and fulfilling life.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share before we wrap up this interview?

A: William, one of the main areas I am focusing on is addressing a growing crisis—the importance of mattering. Today, we face a profound crisis where countless people feel lonely, helpless, hopeless, and battered. Mental health issues are surging, and many individuals experience a deep sense of 'unmattering.' This pervasive feeling of insignificance critically impacts our mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

Mattering is not just a desire; it's a fundamental need for our well-being. It stems from how others perceive and treat us. Recognizing that this sense of mattering is a collective effort is crucial. Others know they matter because of us, and fulfilling this vital human need is a shared responsibility.

Researchers have found that mattering is tied to self-esteem, mental health, and even longevity. Feeling significant boosts confidence and happiness while reducing the risk of severe depression and anxiety.

I'm deeply committed to teaching people that they matter. Our lives hold significance, not just for ourselves, but for the positive impact we can have on others. To truly find this sense of mattering, we must focus on the significance we bring to those around us.

Our thanks to John Miles. More information on John can be found at [www.JohnRMiles.com](http://www.JohnRMiles.com) and [www.PassionStruck.com](http://www.PassionStruck.com). You can buy his book on Amazon [HERE](#).

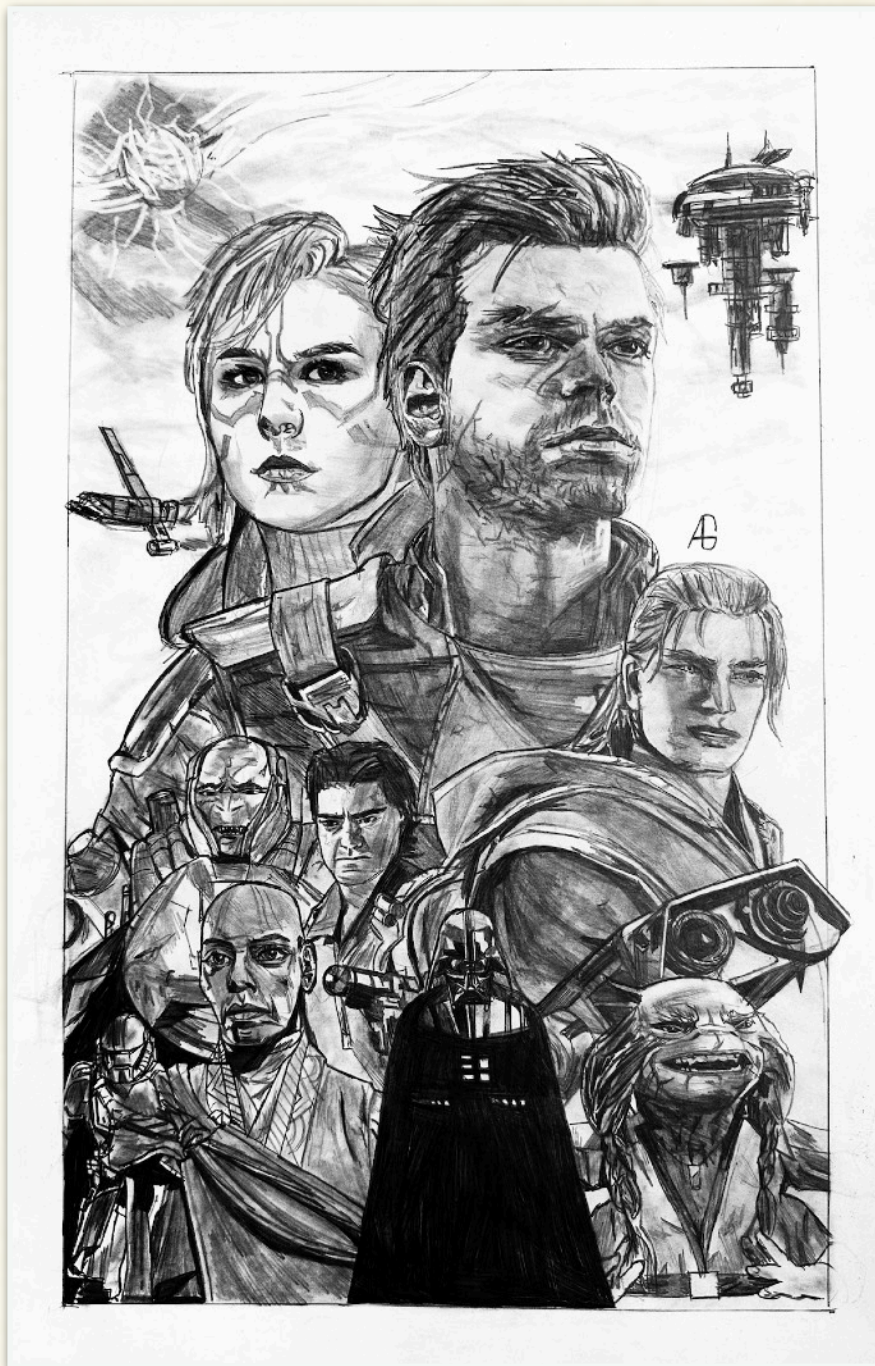


# SCHOOL VIEW



*Photo by William Gensburger*

# ARTWORK



To see more artwork visit <https://addisengensburger.myportfolio.com/>

by Addisen Gensburger

# KINGDOM OF THE PLANET OF THE APES

A MOVIE REVIEW

by WILLIAM GENSBURGER



Caesar is dead. 300 hundred years later, the message of governance and reconciliation with humans has gone astray. The tribes that exist have fractured, and although they cling to the historical memory of Caesar, he has become more myth than anything, so much so that a new leader of one tribe, self-proclaimed Proximus Caesar (Kevin Durand) wields a ruthless power as he attempts to gain entry into the last human bastion,

a doomsday bunker that is impenetrable yet, he believes, holds the power for ultimate control of the planet.

The focus of the movie is a trio of gentle apes: Noa (Owen Teague), son of the leader Koro (Neil Sandilands), who trains eagles, and Noa's friends Anaya (Travis Jeffrey) and Soona (Lydia Peckham). There is no memory of Caesar until their clan is attacked by the warrior gorillas of Proximus, and he meets Raka (Peter Macon), one of the last faithful followers of the original Caesar, safeguarding historical books that he can read. They encounter a human female they name Nova, although Raka confesses they name all human females Nova for a reason he no longer recalls.

The virus that enabled the apes to evolve with language has also had the opposite effect on humans, rendering them mute.

Together, these three endeavor to rescue the remnants of Noa's clan, although Nova



clan, although Nova seems to have an ulterior motive. Their journey brings them to a terrifying conclusion of the future under

Proxima; his reign modeled after the Roman Empire, information he has learned from a captured human, Trevathan (William H. Macy), who has been kept alive to teach Caesar and help him develop new weaponry, such as the stun poles that have given them the edge over the general ape population and the scattered humans.

Visually, the cinematography is stunning, as are the scenes of Los Angeles with a few remnant pieces like the double-arched Los Angeles International Airport tower. Nature has taken everything back, and you can't help but wonder if things are just not better off this way, at least until you realize that the apes are becoming just as humans were, complete with all the pitfalls of humanity.

While Caesar believed that humans and apes could co-exist, Noa realizes that surviving humans will always try to expand and take back what was once theirs.

Compared to the first three renewed Apes movies, this one's plotline is more simplistic and less nuanced about the differences between humans and apes.



Watch: <https://youtu.be/30wH1omc6XM?si=FHKNEG3wUnXgVWsw>

And certainly a far cry from the original 1968 Apes films featuring Charlton Heston. This lot, having succeeded in their quest, has become another version of us. And that's not particularly exciting.

3 stars out of 5



# PRODUCT REVIEW

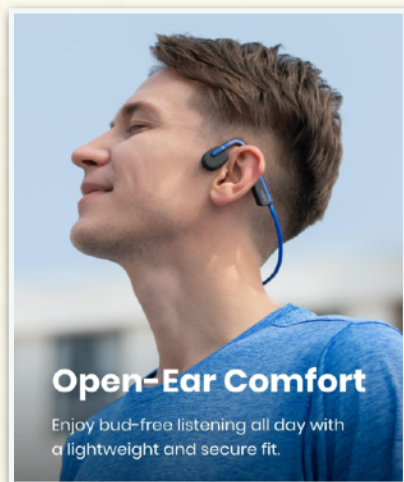
by William Gensburger

If you are like me, you enjoy listening to music throughout the day. The only problem is that it is anti-social. For some reason, those people around you get annoyed while you are happily zoning as they speak to you, only to be ignored.

I have found a solution, a product that I happily endorse for the simple reason that I own one (not a paid promotion), and it works.



SHOKZ (AfterShokz OpenMove - Open-Ear Bluetooth Sport Headphones - Bone Conduction Wireless Earphones - Sweatproof for Running and Workouts, with Sticker Pack



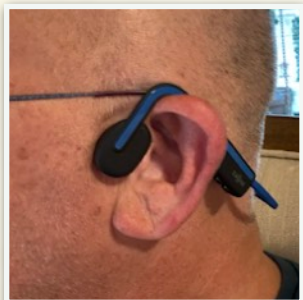
The SHOKZ OpenMove, Open-Ear, Bluetooth is a bone-conducting and open-ear headset that you position comfortably allowing you to hear great music (some loss of bass, but that is fine), and also hold regular conversations.

I have worn mine for almost a month, and I enjoy it. I often forget they are on, and as I go about my daily business, I hear music and think how nice it is before remembering that it comes from my headset.

The charge lasts easily through the day despite constant use. Recharges quickly with a USB-C connection. Comes with a case (I never use) and some color stickers (I have no interest in applying.)

I still use my various earbuds and my Sony noise-canceling headphones, but these get the most use.

To be clear, these are NOT headphones that will give you booming bass and cancel noise. It is not designed for that. It is designed to listen to music, answer calls while still retaining your ability to hear surrounding noise.



I tried bone-conducting headsets a few years ago and was dissatisfied. I find you can place these as close to the ear as you want. The closer, the louder. The optimal position is on the tragus, that piece of cartilage that juts out at the opening of



## SHOKZ (AfterShokz OpenMove - Open-Ear Bluetooth Sport Headphones - Bone Conduction Wireless Earphones - Sweatproof for Running and Workouts, with Sticker Pack

[Visit the SHOKZ Store](#)

4.4 ★★★★★ 15,429 ratings

the ear canal.

You can buy them at a reasonable price on Amazon [HERE](#) for \$79.95. If you want to test them first and have a Best Buy close by, they carry them (at a much higher price) and you can test them yourself.

There is also a Pro version that costs quite a

bit more. If I needed a better sound quality, I would just put in my earbuds.

# VIRTUAL VOICE – MY EXPERIENCE WITH AMAZON’S COMPUTER NARRATION BETA PROGRAM

by Jill Hedgecock

I was excited when Amazon invited me into the program with two of my novels. Unfortunately, they did not include the first in the series. However, after reaching out to Amazon, the first book in my Shadow series was added to the beta program. I am not sure what



selection criteria were used, but I have heard that Amazon is only including single-point narration books into the beta program. All my novels meet this criterion.

There are currently five female and three male narration voices to choose from, but Amazon will be adding more options soon. All voices are intended to represent people in the 30-to-40-year age range. Two of the women speak in a British accent. I had hoped for a younger-sounding narrator because my main character is a teen girl, but Voice Number 7 worked well enough. I feared the voice options would be a tinny computer voice. However, all Virtual Voice choices sound

like real people, and they make many voice inflections indicative of normal speech.

The pricing options are set by Amazon, offering a set royalty of 40% (0.80 cents) if a reader selects an author's book through their Audible program. There is a set price of \$1.99 as an add-on to an e-book purchase. If a reader selects an author's audiobook through Amazon.com, they will receive 40% of the purchase price, which an author can set between \$3.99 and \$14.99.

There are a lot of positives to Amazon's audio program. The process is relatively straightforward. Once accepted into the program, an audio file is generated based on the eBook. On the author's KDP page, an option to continue the setup of the Audible file appears. From here, authors can choose the voice and price and listen to the audio file. The eBook and audio files are linked, so if changes are made to the eBook, the audiobook will be updated, and a new review file will be generated. The updated audio file may have a different reading voice selection than an author's initial selection, so beware.

The process of editing the audio file was easy. The options include adding pauses of various lengths, changing the reading speed, or altering pronunciation. Words like read (reed versus red) and wind (whined versus wend) were some of the corrections I needed to make. A button to click to "apply to all" is available if the word is

used only one way in the book. One interesting side benefit of going through the audio file review is that I learned I had been mispronouncing words. For example, to my surprise, ogle is pronounced O-gull, not aw-gull, as I have always used.

There are limitations to the technology and some downsides. It took me about eight hours to review each of my three books, so there was a considerable time commitment. I believe it is important to listen to the entire narration because the computer made things up. For example, in a deep into the book, the narrator suddenly called one character, David, “David the First”. Later, I found a sentence where I had a phrase that combined David and the word I (David I), but it was earlier when the program decided to call him David the First. I added a pause between David and I, and it fixed the glitch. Another issue I found was it spoke the name Josh as Joshua,

To listen to a sample of Jill's book using Virtual Voice,  
click here > <https://amzn.to/3UStrW7>

even though the character was only ever called Josh. Words that can be pronounced differently depending on context were another thing I learned to watch for. For example, “wind” (as in breeze) and wind (as in wind a clock) or read (as is “reed” a book) or read (as in past tense - he read a book) were recurring mispronunciations. There was an added benefit to reviewing the entirety of the audio file because I found errors in my book that my eye had never caught while reading

the printed page. This caused me to improve the quality of my paperback and eBooks.

I believe it will be a hurdle to overcome a reader's reluctance to listen to a book narrated by a computer because it will probably never be as good as a human voice actor. Although the computerized voice does make inflections, it will not whisper or yell. It also does not emphasize a specific word, though sometimes, using the pause function can help relay an author's intended meaning. Also, the lag time between reading the chapter number and the first paragraph of the chapter can be long.



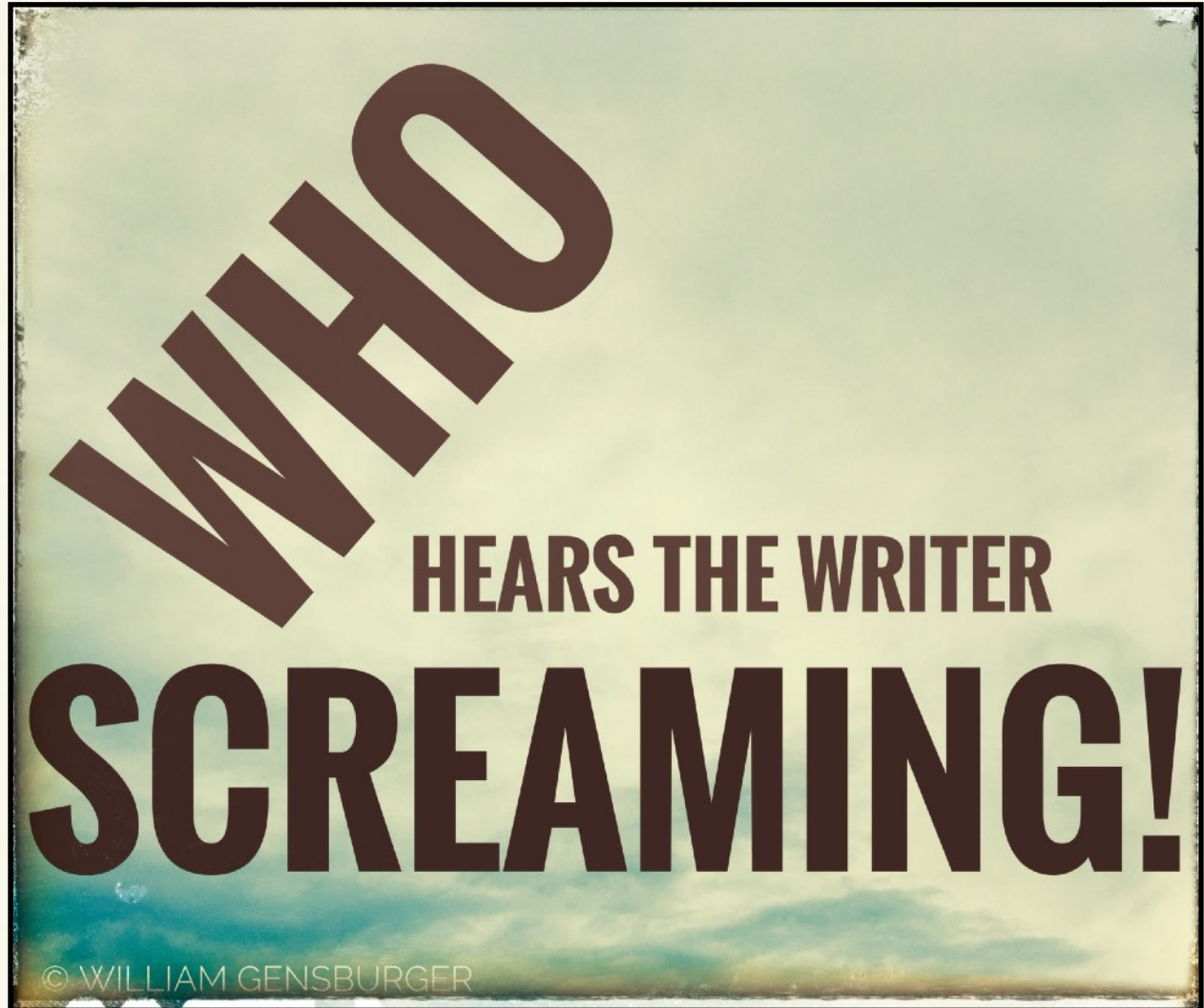
Like any new venture, there are bound to be glitches. However, overall, I am really pleased with the end result of the audio files. As an indie author, I cannot afford a voice

actor. Amazon's Virtual Voice computer narration program allows me to reach visually impaired people who may not be able to read a print or eBook. Amazon requested feedback from those involved in the beta program, which I provided. I am not sure what changes Amazon will make at the end of this trial program, but I am excited to have been part of the process.

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**ABOUT JILL HEDGECOCK**

Jill Hedgecock is the author of five young adult suspense novels, including series starters *Between Shadow's Eyes* and *Rhino in the Room*. Her debut novel, *Rhino in the Room*, won the 2019 Solo Medalist Winner, New Apple Literary Indie Book Award. Her three YA suspense novels, *Between Shadow's Eyes*, *From Shadow's Perspective*, and *In Shadow's Reflection* are currently available as audiobooks using Amazon's Virtual Voice. To learn more, visit <https://amzn.to/3vXOazy> or [www.jillhedgecock.com](http://www.jillhedgecock.com) . Follow her on her author page on Facebook [www.facebook.com/jill.hedgecock.3](http://www.facebook.com/jill.hedgecock.3) and/or on Instagram: [www.instagram.com/hedgecockjill](http://www.instagram.com/hedgecockjill)



# A WRITER'S MARTINI

Elegant and Easy to Make

by William Gensburger



I've always loved the flavor of coffee. Starting as a child, a café au lait, mostly steamed milk with some coffee and sugar, and then progressing to my favorite ice cream flavor, coffee; this taste has remained a favorite all my life.

As an adult, I have discovered a new way to enjoy coffee with, shall we say, a decent kick to it. The Coffee Martini. Flavorful and elegant.





Here is an easy way to make it.

- 2 ounces vodka.
- 1/2 ounce coffee liqueur (usually Kahlúa)
- 1/2 ounce Bailey Irish Cream
- 1-ounce espresso, freshly brewed (or cold brew concentrate)
- Crushed candy-coated espresso beans.
- Ice
- Squares of Ghiradelli dark chocolate (quantity up to you)

Mix the ingredients minus the crushed beans in a shaker. Shake well to super cool. Wet the lip of the martini glass and dip it into the crushed espresso beans. Strain the ice out of the mix and pour the contents into your martini glass. Serve with a square or two of the dark chocolate.

Enjoy. You'll write so much better after this!



PS: As an aside. Here are 2 martini glasses. Did you know that you can pour the one on the left into the one on the right without it overflowing? It's true.

Due to the shape of the glass, the remaining

space at the top is equal to the filled volume. If you have martini glasses, try it and report back.

Cheers!



# THE MAN ON THE TRAIN

A Short Story by MICHAEL BARRINGTON

A man dressed in old-fashioned business clothes takes a train one day every month to London. Everybody believes he has a very important job at the Bank of England; however, he is only a janitor and is traveling to see his autistic, savant sister.

‘Good morning, George.’

‘And a good morning to yourself, Harry,’ he replied with a smile.

‘It’s another beautiful day, and we are still walking upright,’ he



quipped. It was the same remark he made every last Thursday of the month and had been doing so for as long as Harry could remember.

‘It’s the usual,’ then.

‘Yes, thanks, Harry,’ and he handed over the six pounds and ten pence through the narrow ticket office window for the round trip. It was always the same; Crawley to London Victoria Station, and he always took the same

train, the 8:17 a.m. And you could practically set your watch that he would return on the 5:11 p.m. train.

‘He’s a very nice but strange bloke,’ Harry had confided to his friend Alf, the station master, over a cup of tea. There was no train for another hour and a half. ‘Never says much, and I’ve been selling him tickets for almost twenty years. What do you make of him?’

‘I dunno,’ Alf replied. ‘Seems like a proper gentleman to me. Look how he’s dressed. Nobody wears clothes like that nowadays: black jacket, striped pants, bowler hat, rolled umbrella, and briefcase.’

‘Yeah, I’ve heard he’s retired long since,’ Harry replied, ‘but still goes to the city one day every month. I wish I had a good-paying job where I only had to work a few hours.’

‘Somebody told me he’s a bigwig in the financial district,’ Alf said. ‘An advisor to the government or something.’

‘Oh, I can add to that,’ Harry quickly replied. ‘I met a chap last year who came into our pub and we somehow got to talking about some of our regular passengers. When I described George, he said he knew all about him. ‘He’s the person responsible for advising the government when a new budget is being prepared. A genius with figures. A local Einstein,’ he said. ‘I lied and told him you and I had already figured that out.’

George looked for his usual seat in the second carriage from the front, facing forward. He hated traveling with his back to the engine. He liked to see where he was going, to look out of the window and

enjoy the countryside. Having found his place, he carefully placed the Financial Times on the seat next to him, with the headlines clearly visible. Then, opening the London Times, he smiled and snickered quietly as he read, his glasses almost touching the page. But he never failed to notice the inquisitive and furtive glances of the other passengers.

‘I can’t believe what’s happening to this country,’ a friendly voice chirped. ‘Brexit, more bloody likely, Brexshit to me. It’s getting to the point where I might have to give up smoking. It’s becoming just too damned expensive. We should never have left Europe. Give it a few more months, and we probably won’t be able to buy a bottle of French wine, or if it’s available, will cost an arm and a leg. Got your ticket George?’ A smiling ticket collector held out his hand in anticipation.

‘Well, good morning to you too, Syd,’ George beamed. ‘You’re in fine fettle.’

‘I would be if I was as close to the source as you are,’ he said, looking down at the Financial Times. ‘You must be making a fortune with your investments. Couldn’t you just give me one small tip? But no,’ he said, holding up his hand, ‘I know it’s illegal, insider information and all that. Just pretend you never heard me mention it,’ and he looked quickly around at the other passengers. All seemed to be engrossed in their newspapers or on their cell phones. ‘I guess I’ll just

have to go on dreaming or get on that TV show. What's it called, How To Become a Millionaire?'

'I'm sure you've got millions salted away already,' George joked. 'Aren't you intending to buy a house in the south of Spain?'

'Well, that's the dream plan,' he said wistfully. 'But I just wish that earlier in life, I had entered a profession like yours. You're so damned lucky. And now, a part-time job, once a month and just for a few hours. You're a lucky sod. And I'm sure your wife can afford anything she wants too. Not like my missus. Works three days a week as a caregiver at the old folks' home so she can earn some money to play bingo every Tuesday and Friday and enjoy a weekend boozing with her girlfriends.'

Handing back his ticket, Syd continued, 'Same time, same train next month, George and I'll still be here.' And with that, he moved on with checking tickets.

As the train pulled into Victoria Station, George gathered up his briefcase, papers, and umbrella and joined the crowds heading for the exits. His next stop was across the road to the confectionary shop. Aldermans had been selling sweets of all kinds since the time of Charles Dickens, but for the past many years, it was owned by the Turnbull family which had kept the trade name. George's purchases never varied: two Mars bars, a box of Cadbury's milk chocolates, and a box of Pontefract Cakes.

‘So nice to see you again, George.’ A rather rotund, curly, grey-haired woman, probably in her early sixties, gave him a disarming smile. ‘It’s amazing how time flies. I can’t imagine it’s been a month already. How long has it been now? Must be almost twenty years we’ve known each other.’

‘Actually, twenty-three,’ George replied.

‘Oh, yes, I remember now,’ she said, ‘that was after you got the promotion. You tried not to show it, but I could tell you were very happy. And look at you now, only having to work one day a month. The government must be very lucky to have you. I’m sure you could fully retire if you wanted to.’

‘You are too kind, Mabel. And what about you? Aren’t you getting ready for retirement?’

‘Oh, Mr. George. I wish. But you know my William has been unable to work for so long. We have to make do with what I make here at the shop, which, thank God, continues to give us a living. His disability check hardly pays the rent. But I’m afraid of this Brexit thing. It will slow down the number of tourists coming into the city, and I rely so much on them. Not everybody is a regular customer like you. I’m so grateful for your business. You are so fortunate to work for the Bank of England. I’m sure you’re well paid, and no doubt your wife has everything she wants.’

George ignored the last remarks, a skill he had developed over the years. ‘Well, I’m sure every little helps,’ he replied, placing his

purchases in his briefcase. 'Do take care, Mabel, and I'll see you next month.' He returned to the station and took the escalator down to the underground. As if on autopilot, he followed the overhead direction panels to the Blue line that would take him on a fifty-minute journey to Walthamstow. It was always a crowded line, and it was difficult to find a seat until it had passed Kings Cross, which took about twenty minutes. The whole journey lasted almost an hour.

From Walthamstow, George took a cab, and as it swung into a long, familiar tree-lined driveway, a huge red brick building rather like an English stately home, surrounded by trimmed lawns and well-laid out flower beds, came into view. A sign at the entrance read: St. Anselm's Residential Home.

'How nice to see you again, Mr. Hatfield.' A pleasant-looking and smiling woman looked down at him from the open doorway. 'Your sister has been eagerly waiting for you all morning. She will be so happy to see you.'

'And you too, Mrs. Williams. I trust you are well.'

'Well enough, indeed, sir, in spite of a little arthritis in the knee. But let me escort you through. You know the routine.'

Indeed, he knew it well. George understood that going through the metal detector was mainly for his own security, and once inside the locked door, was always surprised by the serenity and cleanliness of everything. Soft music played through a public address system. The décor was modern and in pastel colors, staff wore civilian



clothing and there were plants and flowers everywhere. Mrs. Williams led George to a huge glass-covered sun lounge, where a couple of small groups were engaged in conversation. Her face lit up the moment he entered, and she rushed towards him, holding him in a tight hug. A slightly built woman wearing a brightly patterned dress, her grey hair pulled back and tied in a bun, Alice was three years younger than George. He stood there for a moment holding her, then gently eased her arms away and kissed the top of her head. Leading her by the hand to a small card table, they sat opposite each other. Her caregiver, Sandra, a wonderfully sensitive and capable young woman from Trinidad, withdrew to a discrete distance. That was the signal for Alice to take hold of George's briefcase. The routine never changed.

She took it and momentarily held it with both hands, looking at George expectantly, then placed it next to her. She knew precisely what would happen next. Taking the two newspapers from his coat pocket, he handed them to her. In a lightning move, she picked up the Financial Times, turned to the crossword puzzle, took a pencil off the table, and waited. Alice giggled. George took out a pocket watch from his waistcoat and, holding it in his hand, said 'Go.' The woman never looked up and only once seemed to hesitate, pausing for a moment as she chewed the end of her pencil. Then it was over. She laid the pencil down and looked at George. She heard him press the stop button.

'Four minutes and fifty-seven seconds, Alice,' he said.

'Thank you,' she replied in a sort of distant voice, but her eyes never left him.

Picking up the London Times, he waited until she had found the correct page, looked at his watch, and then at her as she raised her pencil.

'Go,' he said.

These were their games. He couldn't remember exactly when they started; it was so long ago. But he did recall it was after the doctor informed him that his sister suffered from autism and was a savant. She could do complex mathematical equations in a fraction of the time it would take the average person, and they also discovered she was a genius at solving puzzles. In addition, she had a photographic memory for words, yet she rarely spoke, lacked basic social skills, and lived by routines. If ever they were broken or changed, it caused severe mental stress. But Alice also suffered from excessive mood swings and needed regular medication. George learned she was not capable of living on her own and needed twenty-four-hour care. St. Anselm's was the perfect place for her, and she seemed to be very happy there.

With a click, he stopped the watch. 'My goodness,' he exclaimed, 'you are getting faster each time I come. That was exactly five minutes and twelve seconds. You deserve a nice reward. Will you please open my briefcase and see what's inside?'

'Goodies,' she cried as she momentarily fumbled with the clasp, then took out the two Mars bars, the Cadbury chocolates, and the Pontefract cakes. There was no need to ask what she would eat first. Sandra came over and watched as Alice set aside one Mars bar, then took out four chocolates, one from each corner of the box, and placed them in a line on the table. Next, she carefully tore the cellophane wrapper and extracted four Pontefract cakes, setting them on top of the chocolates.

'Here is a paper bag I brought for you,' Sandra said softly. 'Why not put them inside and enjoy them throughout the day? I will hold the rest for you. You know I will help you ration them. You can enjoy them every evening when you watch the Wheel of Fortune.'

'Yes, goodies tomorrow and next tomorrow,' Alice cried, 'That's two full days, forty-eight hours, one hundred and seventy-two thousand, eight hundred seconds.'

Other than the seasons and the weather, the meeting never changed. For George, this was the way it had been for more than twenty years.

As he rode the train back to Crawley, and the regular passengers nodded at him, he realized that nobody in the whole world knew who he really was and smiled inwardly. For more than thirty years, he had worked as a janitor at the London Stock Exchange. As his eyesight, which had always been poor, deteriorated, he went out on disability. That was his sole source of income. He wasn't married,

didn't smoke or drink, and lived frugally in a one-room apartment in a converted large Victorian house. He had one pastime; he was writing a novel about a man who wanted to be a stockbroker.

'A good day at the office, then?' Alf asked solicitously as he walked out of the station to take the bus home.

'Never better,' George replied with a smile on his face and a spring in his step. 'Never better.'

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#### ABOUT MICHAEL BARRINGTON



Michael Barrington, is an international writer specializing in historical novels: *Let the Peacock Sing*, *The Ethiopian Affair*, *Becoming Anya*, *The Baron of Bengal Street*, *No Room for Heroes* and *Passage to Murder*. He has published more than fifty short stories. He also blogs on his website: [www.mbwriter.net](http://www.mbwriter.net) .

# THICKER THAN WATER

A Short Story by ANJI BROWN

Two cousins prepare to divide their grandfather's estate after his death - but all is not as it seems.

To the west, the ground is flat and desolate as far as the eye can see, the rocky soil supporting a sparse covering of heather and gorse. A stand of tall poplars is the only feature, slashing the horizon vertically; crows in the distance, an atonal spatter of ink spots across a white, white page.

The taxi dropped Cian at the end of the drive and, turning with difficulty between the snow-banked verges, headed back towards the town. He tasted peat smoke at the back of his throat, and the damp chill was already inhabiting his bones as he picked his way across the path, frozen and re-frozen into an Alpine terrain, rendering his wheeled case all but useless. The house awaited its guests, lowering at him from the end of a dismal, shrubby drive and hunching its shoulders against the Irish weather, its roots delving down into history and the watchful windows letting him know that his presence would not be welcome.

From her vantage point upstairs, Siobhan was following his progress. Her cousin, Cian. Cian O'Halloran, 54, born and raised in this house but now a resident in Long Island, New York. Nine years her senior, and hadn't he always made the most of his superiority as they were growing up?



Siobhan heard Mrs. Dalton in the main hall.

'Mr. Cian, it's so lovely to see you again, and looking so well.' Time for Siobhan to

greet her cousin.

The damp outside chill had permeated the house itself as Cian stamped the snow from his shoes. The shadowy corners of the bleak hallway still sheltered the wraiths of all his youthful nightmares as he looked around. When he hadn't been away at his boys' boarding school, Cian had had the run of this house, which was both exciting and terrifying in equal measure. The lonely, small boy had wandered the unused rooms with their gloomy, dark furniture, which was somehow always redolent of long-dead things. His only refuge had been the big walk-in safe upstairs, where he was allowed to look at, and occasionally handle, the gemstone collection, his grandfather's pride and joy.

Siobhan descended the imposing staircase slowly.

‘Cian, how nice to see you again after all this time. It’s a shame you weren’t able to be at grandfather’s funeral - it all went very smoothly - but at least you’re here in time to meet his solicitor.’

‘Thank you, Siobhan’ he said, shaking her hand awkwardly. ‘I’m afraid I just wasn’t able to get away any earlier - important business meetings that I couldn’t trust to anyone else - and even so, I’m going to have to leave tomorrow. Still, this will-reading is a bit of a formality, isn’t it? We’ve known grandfather’s plans for years.’

‘Well, yes, but Mr. Salter also wants to know how we’d like to dispose of grandfather’s possessions, furniture and such-like before the house is put up for sale, that sort of thing.’

‘Oh, right. Well, I’m sure we can deal with all that pretty quickly. I don’t believe either of us has any sentimental attachment to all this stuff. I certainly don’t.’

‘Maybe not,’ said Siobhan, although she thought he was being a bit heartless; after all, this had been his home for many years. ‘Anyway, we have time for a cup of tea before Mr. Salter arrives, and I’ve invited him to stay for dinner when we’ve finished all the business paperwork.’ Anything to avoid the necessity of making polite conversation with her arrogant cousin.

Siobhan had always felt clumsy and childish around Cian, never quite good enough, never quite clever enough. His years as a financial expert seemed to have treated him kindly, however, there was just a hint of grey at the temples and maybe some thickening of

the waistline, although it was difficult to see beneath the expensive trench coat. It might have been her imagination, but she still seemed to see that all-too-familiar patronizing expression he wore in all of their interactions, that supercilious attitude that had left her feeling flustered and tongue-tied, mousy and inadequate. Maybe it was this that had led her to always cover up her emotions in public, her true thoughts and feelings concealed beneath a veneer of outward calm and self-control, a precious skill in her chosen career. No one - not even her husband - would ever gain any hint of Siobhan's darkest secrets. She wasn't proud of the things she'd had to do to secure her and Daniel's future, but she would be ready and prepared to deal with the consequences.

Cian followed her into the lounge, where Mrs. Dalton had laid out a tray of tea things, sandwiches and cakes.

'How very British,' murmured Cian, in a slightly mocking tone, 'and how is your career going, Siobhan, still an aspiring actress?' She chose to ignore the insult.

'Yes, I've been very lucky to have a few good roles recently, and Daniel is making a name for himself as a director, so we're often able to work together nowadays.'

'Own your own house yet?'

'Well, actually, no, but as we're traveling quite a bit, renting makes more sense for us at the moment.'



‘Of course, it does,’ said Cian, ‘and you’ll be able to afford anything you want when this business is all completed. All thanks to grandfather’s hard work and business acumen.’

‘Well, that’s a heartless thing to say!’ Siobhan finally lost her patience. ‘I would never have wished him dead just so I could inherit his money!’

‘I’m a realist, Siobhan, life goes on, and unlike you, I’m as successful in my career as our grandfather was. I’ve followed in his footsteps, and I can afford to buy anything I want, so I certainly wouldn’t have wished him dead, unlike some. Maybe I should have tried to get here sooner because it seems just a bit suspicious that grandfather died so suddenly, and just as you’ve begun to realize that your career is going nowhere. Not so many parts around for middle-aged actresses, are there, despite what you say?’ Fortunately for Siobhan, they were interrupted by the sound of the doorbell, and Mrs. Dalton ushered Mr. Salter into the room.

A couple of hours later, their tour of the house completed, Siobhan, Cian, and Mr. Salter were sitting down to dinner, Mr. Salter clutching a list of the items they had decided were to be variously auctioned, given away, or left to be sold with the house.

‘So you just want to keep a few of your father’s childhood items, Mrs. Morgan?’

‘Yes, that’s all really,’ agreed Siobhan. ‘We don’t have anywhere to store anything larger, and this dark wood furniture is not to my taste anyway.’

‘Mrs. Dalton is taking a few smaller items, though, and Mr. O’Halloran, you’re taking the gemstone collection?’

‘That’s correct, Mr. Salter. I don’t need to take anything back to the States, but I can fit the gems into my carry-on luggage. I’ll collect them from the safe before I turn in.’

‘You know there isn’t a light in there,’ said Siobhan, eyes glittering, ‘so don’t forget to use the doorstop stop. If you get stuck in there, no one will hear you.’

‘I think I’m quite used to the safe, thank you,’ replied Cian, ‘I’m sure I can manage.’

‘So that’s all settled,’ sighed Mr. Salter happily, ‘and I understand Mrs. Dalton is taking a couple of weeks’ holiday before she prepares the house for the estate agent. I’m sure she’ll be glad of a rest after this stressful time. As far as the will goes, your grandfather’s estate is valued at about fifty-five million pounds sterling. There will be a considerable sum due for inheritance tax, of course, but apart from a bequest to Mrs. Dalton of fifty thousand pounds, as you already know, after probate, the remainder will be divided between the two of you. Should either of you die within this time period—heaven forbid—then the remaining beneficiary will inherit the full amount. I think that just about completes everything satisfactorily.’

The house was at rest again, turned into itself, settling onto its foundations with creaks and cracks as it breathed the rhythms of age-old ancestors: lives lived and also those unlived. It weighed and judged its guests, their motives and meanings, their drives and desires, and all were found wanting in its presence.

Upstairs, Cian O'Halloran crept into the master bedroom, dragging his case behind him into the safe after carefully putting the old, brass doorstop in place. From the depths of his case, he lifted out a small, velvet-lined box and prepared to make the transfer of grandfather's precious collection. Even handling the stones sent his heart racing. They were fire, they were ice; to him, they were totally transcendent. He was transported back to the conversation with his grandfather. "These are the finest uncut diamonds, Cian, the highest quality. A South African miner gave them to me many years ago as repayment of a debt. The fool never realized what he had, and I certainly wasn't going to tell him! They are worth a small fortune, and if they were cut by a master, then the price would be into the millions." All the research Cian had done back in New York had proved this to be true. Why, the beautiful blue stone he held at the moment would be worth in the region of fifty million dollars alone. The total was far, far more than the cousins' inheritance, and Siobhan had never had any idea. She couldn't dream of the fortune that had been waiting under her very nose. The translucent pebbles shone

with a strange inner luminescence, and to Cian's mind, they gave off a ghostly warmth, the only warmth he had ever found in the whole place. He loved those stones; they gave him solace. They were the only things he did love.

So absorbed was he in handling each diamond before carefully placing it into the new box, he never heard a light tread, creeping softly across the room, or the doorstep gently being removed and the door swinging smoothly back into place.

The next morning dawned crisp, clear, and bright. Siobhan made her way downstairs, ready for a quick breakfast before departing for the railway station. Mrs. Dalton was already in the hall, looking concerned.

'Good morning, my dear. Have you seen Mr. Cian yet today? I can't seem to find him anywhere, and yet some of his things are still in his room.'

'I wouldn't worry, Mrs. Dalton, I know he was planning to leave very early; in fact, I did think I heard a car a couple of hours ago must've been his taxi. I'm sure if he's left anything, it's because he simply doesn't have room in his case and has decided he can manage without. I know I've sometimes done that myself when I've been away.'

'Well, my dear, sure, and haven't we enough to do this morning before locking up the house?'

‘Everything can wait, Mrs. Dalton’ replied Siobhan, ‘You’ll be back to tidy up in a couple of weeks, so anything that gets left can get finished then. If Cian tries to get in touch to ask you to send him anything important that he forgot, he’ll just have to wait until after your holiday, and serve him right.’

‘You’re right, of course. I’ll just wash up the final few breakfast things, and then I’ll be on my way.’

‘Oh, Mrs. Dalton, don’t worry about that. My taxi is coming in about an hour, so I’ll finish here and lock up. You get off on your holiday. Have a lovely rest, and if you need me at all when you get back, you know where I am, and I’ll come and give you a hand.’

Upstairs in the safe, Cian checked the time on his mobile phone. By his estimate, everyone should have left by now and the house should now be empty. That fact alone would be enough to prove Siobhan's guilt. An innocent person would certainly have checked the safe when they saw his things were still in his room and knowing that he’d planned to go in there. Although the safe was not completely airtight, he was starting to feel a little light-headed. With his mobile phone torch on—at least that wasn't affected by the lack of signal— he located the loose brick behind which he'd stored the spare safe key many years ago. If Cian understood the law correctly, he was pretty certain that any perpetrator was not allowed to profit from their crime. Any claim to Siobhan’s inheritance would surely be

waived as soon as she was convicted. He just had to find himself the best legal team money could buy. It shouldn't present too much of a problem; in fact, he was quite looking forward to it.

Siobhan stepped out onto the drive. A fresh fall of snow has wiped away the worries of the world. The house is relaxed, breathing easily again. It has many secrets and will keep many more. That is how it should be and how it has always been.

She climbs into the waiting taxi.

'To the station, then?'

'Yes, please,' she replies, 'I need to get to Cork. I'm in a production at The Everyman Theatre next month, so I need to get to rehearsals.'

'Ah, theatre. I do love a good show. Anything I'd know?'

'It's Shakespeare's Macbeth, and I'm the leading lady.'

'So, Shakespeare, is it?' says the driver, losing interest and stretching forward to turn up his radio.

Siobhan leans back in her seat with a sigh.

'Yes, and I'm Lady Macbeth.' Now there's a woman who did what had to be done to succeed, she thinks to herself.

The house sat back on its haunches. The windows, under their bowed eaves, almost look amused. It watches and waits for the second act.

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**ABOUT ANJI BROWN**

After a career in music and education, Anji Brown now lives in beautiful, historic York, UK, with her husband and dog. As an avid reader, she has an interest in words and language which led her to take an Open University degree in English literature as a mature student.

Although coming to writing later in life, Anji would love to share her work with a wider reading audience.

# WONDER BUGS

A Short Story by E.J. Farnsworth

Two paleo-archaeologists find that global warming offers more excitement than they had bargained for.



Dr. Priscilla Cooper followed in the footsteps of her father, Professor Randolph Cornuta, the esteemed paleo-entomologist whose research into the prehistoric insects of what is now Greenland had smashed academia's received traditions about the survivability of certain species of minute social fauna.

Her claim to fame rested upon continuing her father's research with a view to projecting what she called "the effects of wonder bugs on early primate DNA."

Critical to her latest findings were behaviors of certain samples her father had stored in their attic. As with so many of the Cornuta species, the larval stage was a striking vermilion, indistinguishable in color from the proto-human blood upon which it fed, and its silvery-winged mature mating display held a rare beauty, especially when, in



swarming flight, the desperate creatures spread out to find each other, to propagate and then to lay their eggs in the brief interval before the ephemerae perished.

Fortunately, Dr. Cooper's husband was an expert in every form of insectival and microbial extermination. He joked with his wife during their early courtship that she was playing with creatures brought back to life after one-hundred-fifty-million years of hibernation while his job was to ensure that those same bugs stood no chance of invading homo sapiens as they may have done for their predecessors.

The Coopers' attic was therefore fitted out as a Bio-Level Four (BL-4) redoubt of concentric spheres: its inner sphere contained the humanoid blood and the Cornuta bugs while its outer sphere formed an ethylene oxide barrier promising to forestall any attempt of the bugs to break out of their enclosure and contaminate the surrounding landscape at large.

Today's experiment was being conducted with both the Coopers in full Hazmat bio suits just as the larvae were finishing their blood feast and would soon become mature.

"David," Priscilla said, "As you can see, we are already getting early swarms of mature bugs. Along the edges of the Petri dishes are some silvery eggs."

"Don't get excited, Pris. The mature bugs cannot escape their enclosure without dying."

“Maybe we should call the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases or USAMRIID?”

“What would you want to tell them? We have no release of infectious microbes to report. If you are nervous about the possibility of an unintentional release of the Cornuta bugs, I will



execute our emergency procedures, but that will set back your schedule by eighteen months.”

Priscilla Cooper was anxious about receiving the next tranche of her research funding, which depended directly upon the proof her current experiment was sure to provide—that microbes using the Cornuta bugs as hosts were the real danger to humans.

“You are correct about the potential delay to my schedule. Let’s check everything to be sure nothing unforeseen is happening to our sample set. I have the strangest feeling that something is going horribly wrong with the experiment. The signs of early insect mating are suspicious.”

“Your father, the esteemed professor emeritus, told me we had to be ready for evolutionary changes as well as surprises to our hypotheses.”

“But Dad knew such changes do not happen overnight. Sometimes, they may take ages.”

“Yet our samples are acting more like fruit flies than Cornuta bugs. I wonder whether environmental factors might have already triggered a rapid evolutionary event.”

“That’s a chilling thought. Keep checking for anomalies, please.”

Dave Cooper was now focused on the Petri dishes with the silver eggs along their edges. Pris saw her husband was troubled about something he was observing.

“Tell me what is bothering you, Husband.”

“I hate to break it to you, but the eggs are all over the place and not only around the rims of the Petri dishes. I am going to step out of the inner sphere now and decontaminate. Check your connections and airlocks for any instances of freshly laid eggs.”

“I can see where this logic is heading. What are the odds we have a major breach?”

“I’ll tell you that once I have completed my decontamination.”

While her husband completed his complex procedure, Pris searched her seals to be sure she had not experienced a breach.

“Dave, I see no sign of a breach, but I have swarms of bugs around my airlock seals. The bugs seem to be searching for an opening.”

“I wonder whether they can sense the presence of your blood. That would be a major finding.”

“That’s not very funny, Dave.”

“The bugs’ sensing the blood of homo sapiens could be the trigger for their rapid evolution.”

“Take a close look at the behaviors of the mature males and females around your seals.”

“The bugs are mating frenetically, and they are trying to scratch through my Hazmat seals.”

“I think it’s time to call USAMRIID.”

“Dave, the bugs have broken through my suit! They are biting my wrists.”

“It’s time for you to exit that sphere and go through decontamination—NOW!”

“I am going to do that, but I am turning on my recorder. We are experiencing a historic first. We must publish what is happening to me.”

“What we must do is to save your life. If that doesn’t happen, who will be able to fathom what you have learned from your father’s and your experiments?”

As Pris continued to document what was happening to herself on her recorder, Dave made the phone call to USAMRIID.

“Dave, I am beginning to feel chills. Those bugs seem to be carrying something deleterious to humans—or at least to this human.

Dave Cooper got back on the phone with USAMRIID and updated his report to include his wife’s symptoms.

“The disease control people are on the way!”

“The way I feel, they will not arrive in time. Before I become delirious, I need to tell you something my father told me. It was his suspicion that the Cornuta species was an alien implant.”

“Why is this the first I am hearing about this?”

Priscilla’s delirium rendered her conversation unintelligible. She laughed hysterically.

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#### ABOUT E.W. FARNSWORTH



E. W. Farnsworth is widely published online and in print. For further information, please Google his name and/or visit [www.ewfarnsworth.com](http://www.ewfarnsworth.com).

# HAPPENINGS

People | Places | Events | News

*from bestselling author David Perlmutter:*



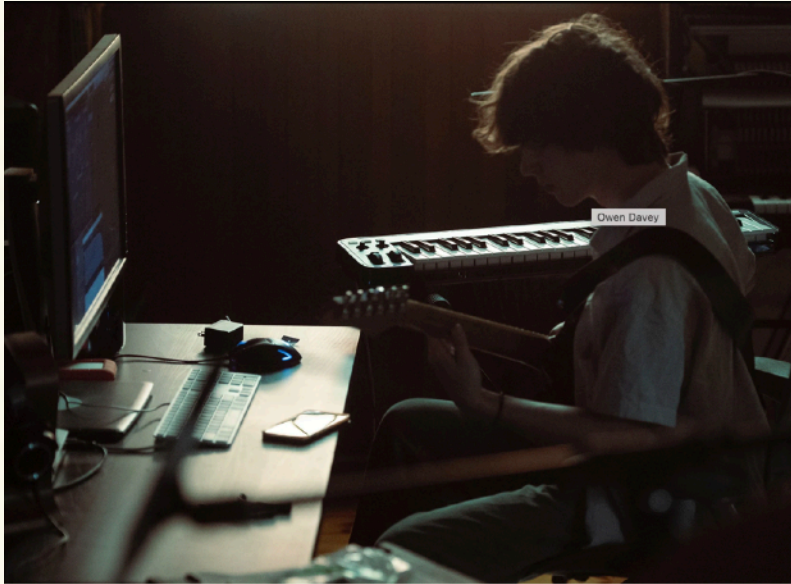
Since the release of my crime thriller, 'Write To Kill', many readers worldwide have expressed that a television series would be a perfect platform for this edgy, tense, and dramatic storyline.

Last month a Kickstarter funding campaign to make this TV pilot was launched with public backing and support increasing daily.

This exciting project now has an international cast, including Sean Cronin, Amber Doig-Thorne, Dan Robins, Rico Morris, Nicole McClean, and Mirella Camillo.

The international production team includes director Chris Butler, executive producer McClean Production, and associate producers Anne John-Ligi, Betsy LuLu, and Michael Gorman.

You can be a part of this exciting venture, offering mouthwatering rewards. Click this link <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/davidpperlmutter/write-to-kill/rewards> for more information, but



note that the campaign ends on June 27, and sadly, if the target isn't reached, we will be unable to make the pilot, and that would be a real crime.

from William Gensburger:

I stumbled across this young man on a social media platform. He's 17, from Canada, and is an incredible musician with a massive following. His name is Owen Davey, and he has many YouTube videos not only playing one instrument on covers of well-known songs but all the instruments.

From Owen's website: At 13, he was the youngest person to sign an artist deal with Ibanez guitars and their only artist to also sign a deal with Tama drums. Owen also endorses Fractal Audio, Sabian, Earthworks Audio, Ernie Ball, and most recently, Roland.

He has built a social media following of over 400,000+ and has had over 100 million views across all platforms.

With over 170,000 followers on TikTok alone, Owen has been building a fan base through his covers, which will soon be used to



Photos courtesy of Owen Davis website

promote his original music. He is also currently in preproduction for a short film documenting his rise as a new artist.

At age 14, Canadian Musician Magazine featured him in an article titled "Young Guns"- 7 guitarists under 30 making waves in the music industry. He was also short-listed for Music Radar's "Young Guitarist of the Year."

At 17, Owen composed an original soundtrack and sound design for the short film "Wilfrid " featured at LA Shorts - an Academy Award qualifying festival. The film won best screen adaptation at The Santa Fe Film Festival, as well as being featured on closing night for the National Film Festival for Talented Youth in Seattle

He has received accolades and support from many industry leaders.

Guitar tabs are available on his Patreon site! Behind the scenes, mix breakdown and tons more will be available soon. Joining as a patron is the best way to support his channel.

PATREON: <https://www.patreon.com/OwenDavey>

TIKTOK: <https://www.tiktok.com/@owen.davey>





You can watch Owen's version of Pink Floyd's 'Great Gig In The Sky' here on our Digital Edition or click <https://youtu.be/QLmzrz3cZnA>

FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/odaveymusic/>

INSTAGRAM: <https://www.instagram.com/owen.davey>

And his website: <https://www.owendavey.ca/>

Do YOU have news, awards, book signings, and more that you wish to share? Submit it on our website [HERE](#) by the 20th of the month prior to the issue date.

# The DEAL

Poetry by Ali Ashhar

The walls of my room have held  
the strangest of secrets for a while.  
The windows know all sullen horizons  
through the boulevard of time.  
For years,  
I have been trying to capture my life  
around the ghettos of pen and paper;  
the syllables I yield with my blood  
weigh the heaviest  
when put on my soul,  
and lightest when  
put on the internet.  
The roof over my head witnesses  
my untamed solitude put to serene pages  
over and over again;  
it resides in the  
moment and in retrospect.

Someone knocks  
at my door  
and calls for a deal  
while others watch from  
down the lane  
for them—  
it's a saga  
from alphabets to pages  
for me—  
it's a war  
from life and beyond death.

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#### ABOUT ALI ASHHAR



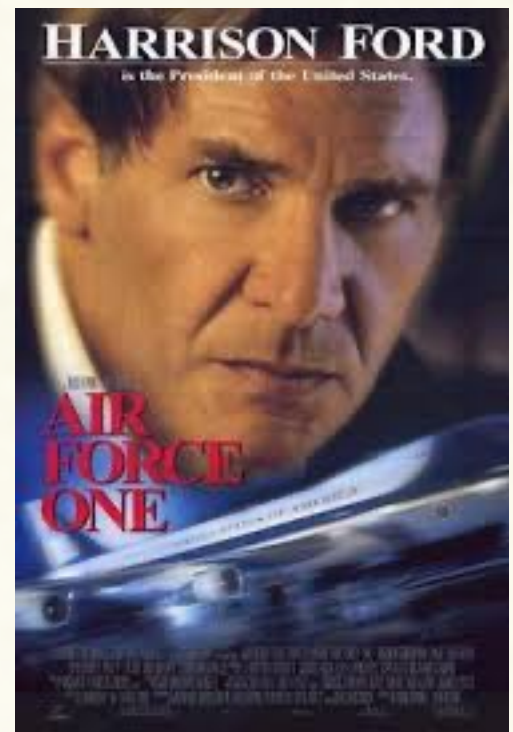
Ali Ashhar is a poet, short story writer and columnist from Jaunpur, India. He is the author of two poetry collections: *Mirror of Emotions* (Notion Press, 2021) and *Across the Shore* (Zorba Books, 2024). He was chosen as the Best Debut Author for the year 2021 by The Indian Awaz and was the recipient of an India Prime 100 Authors Award. His works appear in Indian Review, The Raven Review, Wild Court International Poetry Journal and The Bosphorus Review of Books, among others.

# POLL RESULTS

## Who was the best movie President of the United States?

In our last issue we asked the above question of the following candidates. Here are the results with their total votes

- (325) Harrison Ford: Air Force One 1997
- (71) Michael Douglas: The American President 1995
- (44) Bill Pullman: Independence Day 1996
- (5) Morgan Freeman: Deep Impact 1998
- (2) Kevin Kline: Dave 1993
- (0) Jack Nicholson: Mars Attacks 1996
- (0) John Travolta: Primary Colors 1998
- (0) Jeff Bridges: The Contender 2000
- (0) Billy Bob Thornton: Love Actually 2003
- (0) Geena Davis: Commander in Chief 2005
- (0) Jamie Foxx: White House Down 2013



Thanks to those who participated.

# NORMAN ROCKWELL, OUT OF THE CLOSET

An Article by Wayne F. Burke



Norman Perceval Rockwell went into dementia in the last years of his life and died, at age 84, in 1978. He was a deeply insecure human being—about himself and his work. Even as a cultural icon, he still distrusted his judgment, wondering if the quality of his work was slipping, if the editors would take it if he and his work were passe—too old-fashioned. His insecurities—masculinity among them, struggles with self-worth and the worthiness and meaningfulness of his work, drove him to achieve a kind of perfection in his work and self.

He wore rose-colored glasses an inch thick, refusing to acknowledge the seamier side of life, though in a few pictures, very few, he stepped out of character: with a picture/poster of a machine-gunner, 1942, and a 1960s painting of a little black girl escorted by U. S. Marshalls, he presented a deeper reality, clearer vision, than his usual joshingly superficial emotionalism—the signature of his work. His seven years in therapy with Eric Erikson did bring a deeper psychology to his work, but the depth remained at the shallow end of the pool.

“I have the ability,” he wrote in his autobiography, ‘My Adventures As An Illustrator,’ “to ignore unpleasant or disturbing experiences.” (In the autobiography, he failed to mention his second wife’s alcoholism—they were married for twenty years.)

He remained mostly in total denial of reality, setting out, purposely, to create a kind of alternative and prominently adenoidal looney-tune world.

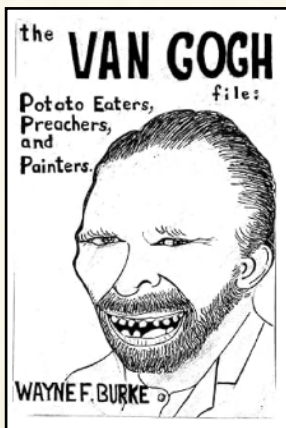
As a product of a valetudinarian mother and a cold remote father (a salesman), Norman became an emotionally stunted pedantic oddball whose work straddled worlds of illustration and fine art. Whenever asked, he always declined to describe himself as an “artist,” insisting he was an “illustrator.”

A display of humility, Deborah Solomon noted (in her Rockwell biography, ‘American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell’) or a defensive feint—“he couldn’t be rejected by the art world if he rejected it first.” The insipid emotionalism of his characterizations ensured his place as an illustrator.

Though Americanizing Dutch realism, as Solomon also remarked, his technique—fidelity to realism, and to the shallowness of his vision—made his work’s elevation to rarified “art” probable though only as a side-show, as an art of eccentricity, and not for the big tent.

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#### ABOUT WAYNE F. BURKE



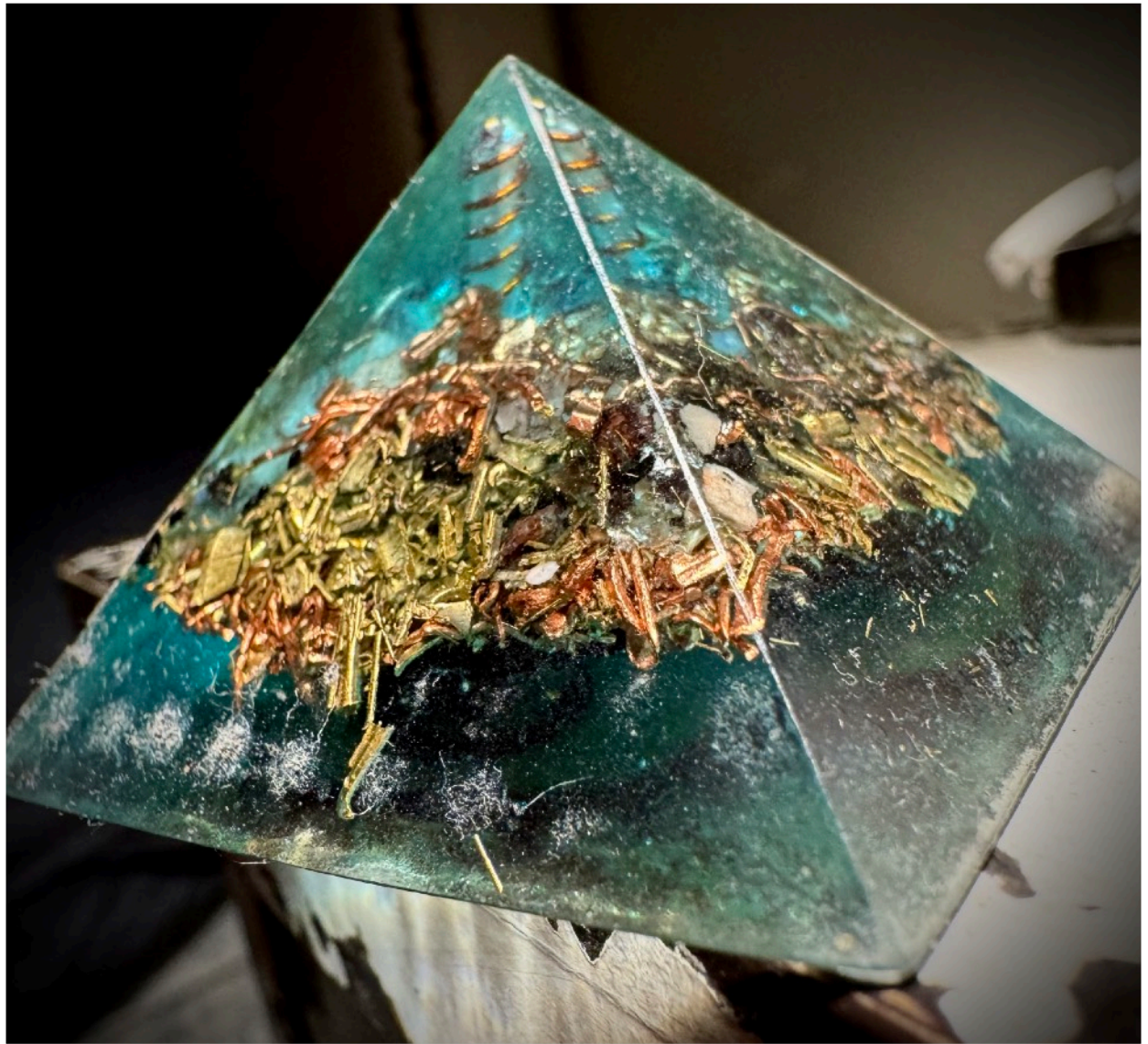
Wayne F. Burke is primarily a poet, although he dabbles in art criticism. A Norman Rockwell illustrated calendar hung on the kitchen wall and was a constant during his childhood. He lives in Vermont (USA).



His latest book on Van Gogh, ‘t h e V A N G O G H f I l e: POTATO EATERS, PREACHERS, AND PAINTERS;

is available on [Amazon HERE](#), or, from [CyberWit](#), his publisher.

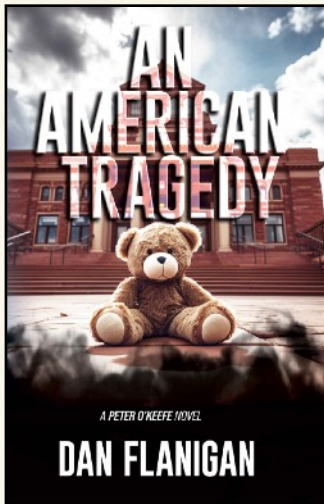
# MINDGATE



*Photo by William Gensburger*

# BOOKS 2 READ

## **An American Tragedy (Peter O'Keefe Book 4) by Dan Flanagan**



### No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

In the scorching summer of 1988, amidst the frenzy of the Satanic Panic gripping the nation, private detective O'Keefe finds himself thrust into a trial like no other. As he strives to establish his fledgling agency, the last thing he anticipates is being drawn into a harrowing legal battle. But when Virginia Montrose, “Miss Ginny” to her students and his daughter Kelly’s most beloved teacher, is accused of heinous crimes against her current and former students, O'Keefe faces a moral quandary unlike any before.

Despite the risks and the overwhelming stigma, O'Keefe’s encounter with the shadowy child protection figures driving the prosecution sparks a fierce determination to seek truth and justice.

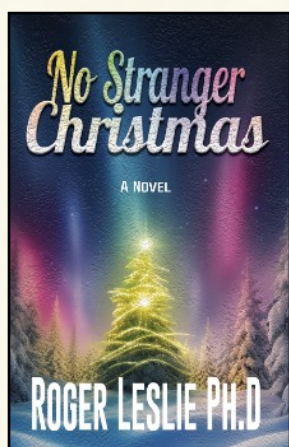
In this gripping tale of courage and conviction, O'Keefe's resolve is put to the ultimate test as he confronts the darkest facets of human nature and dares to challenge the prevailing hysteria. O'Keefe must



summon every ounce of his strength to uncover the shocking truth while struggling to reverse the relentless tide of injustice.

Learn more and [Buy HERE](#)

## **No Stranger Christmas** **by Roger Leslie**



While trying to save Christmas for his financially struggling family, 14-year-old Frankie Lincoln finds the courage to explore his artistry, stand up to gay discrimination, and pursue first love.

Read more and [BUY HERE](#).

# ON WRITING

## Story Mechanics, a Primer

by Matthew Hughes

Most genre novels, and most Hollywood movies, for that matter, are built along the same lines. You start with a character who has a normal situation. The situation may not be normal to us, but it is to the character. Then, something happens that propels the character into a new situation. The something-that-happens is variously called



Plot Point One or the Initiating Incident or

just The Thing That Happens. It's when

Dumbo wakes up in a tree and can't account

for how he got there, or Luke Skywalker

prods a droid and sees a hologram of a

princess who needs rescuing, or when

Dorothy's house gets swept up in a twister

and lands on a witch in Munchkinland.

From then on, the character's situation changes. The new situation is full of conflict. There is an external threat/goal/need to be dealt with. The character acts to deal with the external conflict, which only intensifies so that the character meets continual resistance until the story arrives at a moment of crisis. The character then makes a critical choice that resolves the external conflict, and the story comes to its climax, followed by a denouement.

But there's been another conflict going on all the way along the yellow brick road that leads to the moment of truth: an internal conflict that is tied in with the external struggle. Dumbo doesn't believe he can fly; he credits his ability to a magic feather; Luke doesn't believe in all this Jedi-and-the-Force business; Dorothy ran away from the home where she was loved because she thought he would be happier over the rainbow.

The moment of truth resolves both conflicts at once because those conflicts are inextricably bound together in the person of the character and his/her situation. Dumbo, stuck at the top of the circus tent without his talismanic feather, has to take a leap of faith in his own specialness—his "hero-ness"—and saves his mother; Luke has to turn off his computer and trusts the Force to make the crucial shot that will blow up the death star; Dorothy has to realize that there's no place like home because only that realization will get her back to where she truly belongs.

The trick to doing these stories is the creation of the two linked conflicts and then bringing them together at the moment of choice. Paying off both conflicts at once gives the readers the satisfying experience that they're paying for.

The other crucial elements are that the hero has to solve the problem for him/herself and that the conflict that began with the initiating incident has allowed the hero to develop to the point where

he/she has become capable of making the choice. Dumbo could fly when he woke up in the tree, but he didn't have faith in himself; Luke had the Force all the time, but he had to come to accept his destiny; Dorothy thought happiness lay over the rainbow and had to learn the truth before she could go home and know it was where she belonged. This process of developing the character is crucial to creating character-driven fiction.

The hero can be guided toward the crucial decision and can have a Sancho Panza helper who plays a vital role, but it must come down to the hero's own choice to do the right thing. If some external force solves the problem, then you've got the deus ex machina failure.

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#### ABOUT MATTHEW HUGHES



Matthew (Matt) Hughes writes fantasy, space opera, crime fiction, and historical novels. He has sold 24 novels to publishers large and small in the UK, US, and Canada, as well as 100 works of short fiction to professional markets.

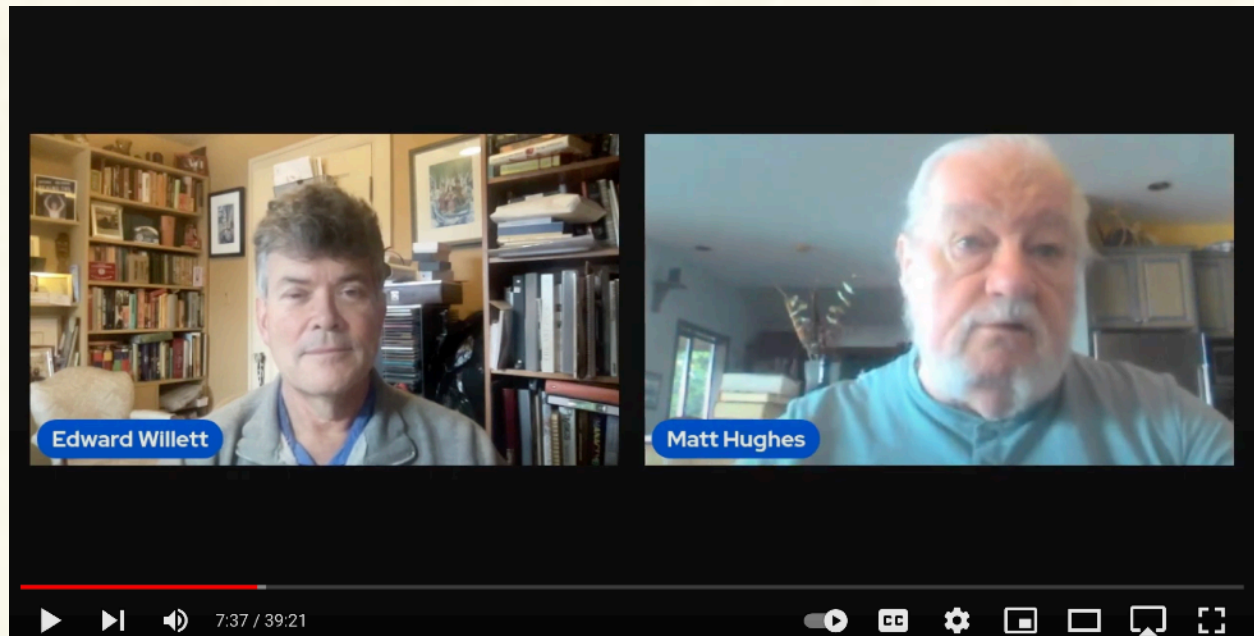


He has won the Endeavour and Arthur Ellis Awards and has been shortlisted for the Aurora, Nebula, Philip K. Dick, Endeavour, A.E. Van Vogt, Neffy, Derringer, and High Plains Book Awards. He has been inducted into the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association's Hall of Fame.

People who sign up for his monthly newsletter will receive a free ebook of his short story collection, 9 Tales of Henghis Hapthorn:

<http://eepurl.com/cyNSA9>

Find all his books [HERE](#).



Watch an interview hosted by Edward Willett with Matthew Hughes [HERE](#)



Dear Reader,

We've reached the end of this issue. I hope you enjoyed it. If so, please let me know [HERE](#).

There is more to be found on our website at [www.BooksNPieces.com](http://www.BooksNPieces.com) and be sure to sign up for our mailing list.



And, if you are interested in short stories, I suggest my book of 10 well-received stories titled: 'Distant Rumors' which you can find [HERE](#) and on my website [www.Misterwriter.com](http://www.Misterwriter.com).

~ William G

