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AUGUST 2022

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Interviews

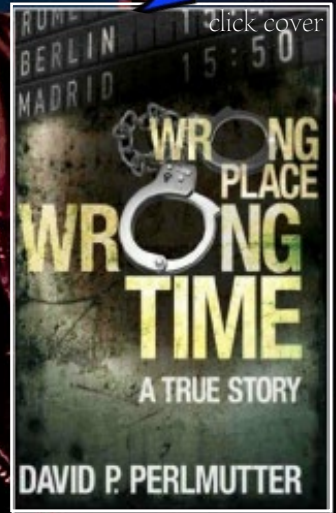
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Midway Thru 2022 Already!

There's an old saying in my family that states once July has come and gone, Christmas is a mere few weeks away.

And here we are, once again. Despite a tumultuous time in our society, despite restrictions still in place in some states, and despite uncertainty in the economics of our country, time continues to pass.

This issue features bestselling author, actor, David P. Perlmutter. His books, many based on true events, have drawn a wide interest from the reading public. A glance at the number of reviews and star ratings certainly cements that. You may have seen him on television commercials, riding in a golf cart with Idris Alba for booking.com.

His story is fascinating, made more so by his dyslexia that has not held him back.

Another interesting author, Mack Little, has had a diverse life, exposing her to many different cultures and countries. Her focus allows her to find her readership niche and a solid following.

And Dr. Teresa Cody, an author and wellness specialist who has written a book about the miraculous benefits of PRP Therapy (Platelet Rich Plasma).

Four short stories that you will enjoy. We receive many stories each month and selecting the best is always fun. A shout out to duotrope.com where many of the authors found us. Duotrope lists markets for your stories, contests and other interesting and related items. We do not get compensation for mentioning them, and I

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With this issue we are introducing a NEW section: **Writing Tips**. This section offers a wide variety of tips from proper formatting, word choice, and ways to not annoy the editor when you send your story. We hope you will find them useful.

We plan to expand Books & Pieces Magazine to be a resource all writers will want to use. And while you can buy a print edition from Amazon, it is FREE to read online. You can't beat that!

Enjoy this issue and please share it with your friends and family. Help us reach even more writers and readers.

And dust off those Christmas decorations—you know that the stores will be stocking up very soon.

Cheers,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'William Gensburger'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

William Gensburger

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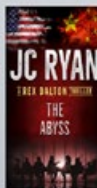
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SHORT STORY

Birthday Cake

by Chere Taylor

My mother is dying. I say these words to myself as I peel then halve the onions for my extremely simple version of a *guk* soup. My husband, who is white wants to celebrate my Korean ancestry today, even though my culture is almost as foreign to him as it is to me. But this morning I play along. Rice, soup and eggs for breakfast. I hate myself for doing it.

My mother is dying of breast cancer.

After dropping Kimmy off at school, I drive to the local grocery store. Not to Woo Sung's Bakery, the store my mother owns, but an everyday Walmart and buy the most ooey-goey cake available. Something large and obscene and American. Something I know she would instinctively disprove of. Today is her sixty-eighth birthday. That combined with cancer diagnosis takes away all of my excuses not to see her.

You're a bitch, Hana, I tell myself as I stack not one, but two separate cake boxes at the register. But if there is arrogance in my purchase, then there is also the need to re-assure too. I have enough money to buy birthday cakes now. Well, technically it's my husband's money. I could

go back to work if I really wanted to. It's my own laziness that prevents me.

My parents Kim-Ha-Eun and Kim-Young-Ho migrated from South Korea during the Gwangju Uprising. My father had a visa to work as a neurologist at the Los Angeles Memorial Hospital. My mother was already pregnant at the time. The plan was to have all their children born in California so that we would be legal Americans. Ha-Neul my sister was born only one month after their official arrival and then I came along two years later.

Even now I can remember the fear. It was something that lived in our spacious yet sterile high-rise condo, despite my father's smiling face and my mother's reassuring hugs. The unnamed fear choked the air, like a smothering

blanket. My three year old self would often look for the source of that fear, imagining that it had to be a monster of some sort. A grinning lip-sticked clown perhaps or a half human, half animal creature, crouching, waiting outside our front door. Any moment it would bust through the door and eat us all up. We were all doomed.

In reality the fear was probably nothing more than my parents nervousness over adjusting to a new culture and a new language. They had no family in California. No friends waiting for them there, though they initially moved to Koreantown so there was the comfort of their native tongue. Even so the monster did strike. When I was four, my father died from a bullet wound during a convenience store

robbery. Shortly afterwards Ha-Neul came down with meningitis and almost died.

I take the two clumsily stacked cake boxes to the information desk, waiting for someone to stop me. To explain that outside food loaded with diabetes inducing levels of sugar were forbidden. God forgive me, but part of me even wants to be stopped. See mom, I did try to visit. I could tell her on the phone. But they stopped me from entering your hospital room to celebrate your birthday. It's not my fault.

The receptionist hardly notices me. Lousy security at hospitals these days. I use the elevator to reach the second floor and enter her room quietly in case she's sleeping.

Her room is small and has that thick disinfectant/medicine odor that all hospitals seem to have. There is only one small bouquet of flowers on her table. I check to see if it is from Ha-Neul, knowing full well it wouldn't be. Sure enough the label declares, Get Well Soon, from all of us at State Farm, her insurance company. I set the boxes on the table.

Next, I examine her sleeping body, something I wouldn't dream of doing if she were awake. My husband told me that she had gotten a mastectomy, possibly on both breasts, and in horrid fascination I look for signs of their removal. What would that look like, feel like? A major source of your femininity gone forever? But heavy blankets cover her. I can't tell what's been done to her chest. The skin sags on her face and arms. Her hair is streaked with random strands of white. The woman who once told me to always keep an extra fifty in your bra and would often get wolf whistles as she walked down the street, has become this, a living skeleton.

I feel like shit. As if my refusal to see her in the last five years has made her sick, destroyed her body. You're a lousy daughter, Hana. I bend over and wake her gently.

"Om妈" I tell her, my hand on her knobby shoulder. "Om妈, kkaeuda. Naya Hana. (Mama, wake up. It's me Hana.)"

She wakes easily and smiles at me. It is the same strong smile I remember from my childhood. I'm glad her mind is still there.

However it was a mistake for me to speak to her in Korean. Now she wants to talk in her native tongue and I'm clumsy with the language. Answering in two word phrases and always translating her words first into English in my head. Eventually, she takes pity on me and we continue our conversations in English. Her questions are simple and safe. How was my family? How was Kimmy performing in school? None of us mention her health, how long she has to live or my sister Ha-Neul.

She turns towards the table. "Why bring two cakes?" Her voice is weak, non-accusing.

Guilt assaults me. My original plan was to build a two tier birthday cake out of the two individual slabs because I couldn't find a pre-made one at Walmart. Korean cakes are small, less sweet and there is something distinctly private about them. I knew this excess of sugar, icing that could feed a crowd would be an insult to her frugal sensibilities. But I no longer want to hurt this broken woman who lies helplessly in a hospital bed. She isn't a threat. I think of a clever lie.

"It's to celebrate both your birthdays."

"Both my birthdays?"

"Yes. January 25th and New Year's." The

Korean tradition was that everyone ages one year on January 23rd, the Korean New Year. I remember the fantastic celebrations we had in the past with both Ha-Neul and myself receiving gifts.

My mother shakes her head. "Korean birthday, January 1st."

"What?"

"You think of New Year, Seollal. Seollal not Korean birthday. Seollal starts on Lunar New Year, January 23rd.

Then I get it. I had the dates confused with the Seollal, a totally separate holiday then the traditional New Year/Birthday on January 1st. I see the disapproval in her down-turned lips. She thinks I don't care enough about my culture or her personally to make what to her is a ghastly mistake. Her feelings are hurt. And I'm hurt that she's hurt. But I also feel something else come alive in me. A spark ...

"Such a waste." She continues to shake her head...that turns into a flame. The beginnings of anger.

"New Year. January 1st," she repeats, as if I'm exceptionally slow.

"Okay. Don't eat it then." I take the second cake box and immediately dump it in the trash basket. Her eyes watch me, vulture-like.

"Such a waste," she says yet again.

"I know. That's why I threw it away. You said so yourself. It's not January 1st. Today is January 25th."

"How much it cost?"

"What does it matter? Leo makes over eighty thousand a year." Leo is my husband.

"How much you make?"

My lips press tightly together on their own accord. "You know the answer to that."

"Nothing. You make nothing."

I turn around and busy myself with the paper plates and plastic utensils. She is dying. You don't want to get into an argument with your dying mother. How could you ever forgive yourself for that?

"Do you want a piece of cake?" I ask brightly with my back facing her.

"You cannot afford to throw away birthday cakes."

Oh, I know you can't afford to mom, I reply in my head before the bitterness sinks in, consumes me. The deep seated memories rise in me like vomit.

After my father died, we moved away from Koreantown, and settled in a more affordable neighborhood near Compton. To my child mind, it was to get away from the monster. The same fear producing monster that caused my parents to flee their native country, and then force us out again from Koreantown. I was bussed to a mostly white school to help keep it desegregated while my mother found work in a Korean bakery. My sister who became mentally challenged from her bout with meningitis attended a private school.

I remember my classmates, both white and black, stretching their eyes with their fingertips in supposed imitation of me, the *Oreo-ental* girl. That was how they pronounced the word, as if I were some sort of cookie. I was Oreo-ental and Chinese. But the absolute worst were the birthdays. It was the custom for each child's mother to bring a store bought cake, cut it up then serve it to

**You don't
want to
get into an
argument
with your
dying
mother.**



all the students on their child's birthday. We would all be required to sing Happy Birthday. It was a welcome celebration. Everyone joined in.

My mother's cakes were beautiful, but so petite and polite. No cartoon characters adorned them, like a yellow frosted Pac-Man or Smurfs made from blue icing. There was only enough to serve two, maybe three people at most. The entire class would stare at me, as the teacher (never my mother, she had to work) cut one fat slice and then slid the plate in front of me for me and me alone. My cheeks would heat with shame as they sang Happy Birthday. The shame of being treated differently from everyone else. A freak. Sometimes, I cried, but I always choked down at least three bites so my classmates wouldn't have more fuel to gossip about me with.

I would have preferred not to have a cake at all. But how could I explain this to my mother, that her sincere actions of love were unwanted? The monster had returned and now I was old enough to understand it's whispered message. There's not enough money. Not enough

money. Store bought cakes were expensive while the ones she made by hand at the bakery were mostly free. Would I add to the voice of that monster, with my own selfish desires? Especially with the freshly cut wound of her dead husband and my father still festering inside the both of us? Not to mention the difficulties of raising two daughters as a single parent, the oldest who was mentally challenged?

"You did the same thing mom."

I remind her gently. "You married a man who financially supported you."

"Yes, but I always have own money. Every time Young-Ho give me twenty-five dollar, I save five. When he give me ten dollar, I save two. For every dollar I save quarter. I never not save money. That's how when your Appa died, I have money to buy Bakery Shop. That's how I have money to take care of you and Ha-Neul."

As opposed to the lush who depends solely on her husband for money, thereby rolling back women's rights by seventy five years or so. Right ma?

"Oh really? You took care of Ha-Neul?" The words slip out as easily as a poison dripping from a dart.

"What you mean?"

"Nothing." Shut up Hana! I scream inside. But I feel the rage in me, the flame quickly surpassing the campfire stage and becoming a fire forest of rage. I'm afraid of my own anger and my mothers too. Our combined bitterness could be disastrous for the both of us. Wake up the old monster, that had never quite left our family but fell into a fitful sleep after my mother inherited (not bought) the Korean

bakery she used to work in, and I left to become an eventual dropout in college. So shut up Hana. Please eat your cake like a good Oreos-entail girl and shut the fuck up!

I cut two perfect geometric squares and leave hers on the table so she wouldn't think I was being pushy. She seems to be lost in thought. Meanwhile I take a forkful of chocolate goodness and shove it in my mouth. It's like eating a spoon of raw sugar. Possibly a side-effect from my raging emotions. I force a smile on my face.

"I did what was best for Ha-Neul," my mother says at last, "Buddha takes care of Ha-Neul."

"Look Mom, you're not feeling well." I'm sorry for the whole argument now. I want to apologize but my own stubborn pride won't allow it.

"She was not thriving here," my mother says.

Not thriving here? Was Ha-Neul a house plant?

"Are you sure it wasn't so you could save more money?"

She sits up. "I jeoldaelo, I never," she begins again, "would send my daughter away to save money. If I want to save money, I send you away too."

"Alright mom. Sorry I was born. Sorry I'm such an embarrassment to you." I toss my cake into the wastebasket and pick up her slice wanting to throw it away too. I don't quite have the nerve to do this though.

"Babojishajima Hana!"

This roughly translates into, Don't be stupid, Hana.

I put her plate back down and sit on the side of her bed in an almost parody of affection. Our foreheads nearly touch. "You know what I think?" I whisper, "I think you were embarrassed at what your neighbors

would say about you, having a grown child living at home. Never mind the fact she had the mind of a nine year old. You had this Americanized ideal of what was acceptable in your head, and you cared more about the opinions of strangers than your own daughter. So, you sent her away. Period."

The fist comes, not a flat palm, but a fist that lands weakly against my cheek. There's no pain. But the damage has been done. The symbolic cord that has tied us as mother and daughter is cut. She hit me!

My mother isn't crying. Her eyes are as hard as obsidian stone. But I sense a horror lurking behind them, a kind of churning sorrow. The type of sad acceptance that occurs when you realize you have accidentally chopped off a piece of your own body and something crusty and unnatural has grown in its place.

"Okay, sorry I bothered you. I'm going now. You get some sleep." I dump the rest of the food into the garbage including the slice I originally saved for her. She turns her head towards the wall as I move. There is no eye contact.

I escape the hospital as unobtrusively as I first entered.

Back inside of my parked car I scream. I yell so loud the veins stand out on my forehead. How can you treat your mother so horribly? Throwing Ha-Neul into her face? My self-hatred feels like some murderous, red bird pecking my insides raw.

Yet another tiny part of me cries in defiance. Have you forgotten what she did to Ha-Neul?

When Ha-Neul turned twenty-one, my mother told her she had a special present for her. She put a thousand dollars in a

South Korean Citibank and then another two hundred American dollars directly into Ha-Neul's hand. In her other hand, she placed a pre-packed suitcase and told her she would be living in Seoul from that point on. Once she arrived, Ha-Neul had strict instructions to contact her uncle on my father's side who gave my mother vague promises about helping Ha-Neul secure her own apartment and a reasonable job despite her not having a work permit. My mother put Ha-Neul on an airplane with her passport and ...

... And we never heard from her again. No phone calls, no letters. No email exchanges. The thousand dollars remained untouched. She went to Seoul when she was twenty-one and Seoul swallowed her whole.

Two years later my mother invited me to travel to South Korea to visit Ha-Neul. That was how she put it, but in reality it was to find her. We spent a week in a pleasant hotel, while hunting down said uncle who apparently moved away only weeks after Ha-Neul's arrival. He said that his niece never contacted him and was rather resentful of our intrusive questions and indirect accusations.

The police weren't much better as her disappearance happened over a year and a half ago and they had more pressing matters.

Towards the end of the week, I saw this hardness grow inside my mother, something I admired as well as despised. It was the same firmness that tried to suppress the voice of all the monsters from my childhood and even reality itself. Ha-Neul was doing fine, she told me on the plane ride back home. Why? Because she said so.

We never visited South Korea again. Whenever anyone asked about my sister, my mother would quietly inform them that she was living a happy life in Seoul, married with two children. I never added my own doubts when my mother said these things. It was around this time I stopped visiting her, though we both would make the occasional phone call to each other on special occasions.

I rest my forehead against the steering wheel and sigh deeply, wishing I could fix everything. Wishing I could grow that same hardness in me, that lies within my mother, even though I know it has half destroyed her. After a couple of more deep breaths, I pull out of the parking lot. I'll call her sometime tonight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chere Taylor enjoys wasting many hours of her life buried in a good book or binge watching bad cinema on Netflix. She has a passion for reading, writing and almost everything involving Stephen King. You can find her work in, *Anotherealm*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *The Chamber*, *Granfalloon* and *Potato Soup Journal*. She's also been known to lurk around her Inkitt account at <https://www.inkitt.com/chereevans>

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A CONVERSATION WITH...

David P. Perlmutter

When Real Life Supplies the Best Stories

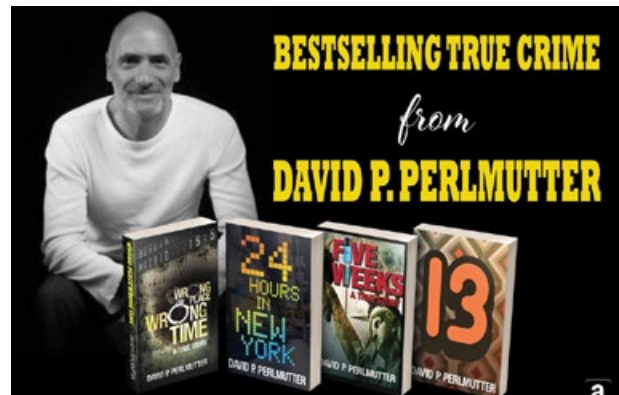
David Perlmutter is the bestselling author of 14 books—four true stories, one fiction, a children’s book and eight marketing books. One of his true stories, titled ‘Wrong Place Wrong Time,’ about his nightmare trip to Marbella, is being made into a movie, and has been a #1 Bestseller on Amazon in the UK, America, Spain, Canada and Australia, with over 1,000 5-star reviews.

WG: Your book ‘Wrong Place Wrong Time’ has done extremely well. I noticed that there are many other books on Amazon with the same title. How did you manage to differentiate your book from the fray?

DP: Thank you, and a great question. There are a number of books of the same title now, but when I first published my book, there weren’t as many. The difference between my book and the others of the same name is that my story is not fiction, it’s a true story and the only one which is a book-to-movie project.

WG: I read that you do not ask and do not pay for reviews. How did you manage to get so many reviews? You have over 1000 5-star reviews. Is there a secret trick?

DP: I’m overwhelmed by all the five-star reviews. I don’t have a secret trick at all. I guess it’s a compelling and intriguing true story based on my events in London and Marbella. I’ve never paid for a review and never will. I do receive messages on a daily basis from companies or individuals who ask for payment and in return, they will



read the book and post a review, but this is not for me. I prefer organic reviews.

WG: What took you to Portugal and where in Portugal were you?

DP: I moved to Portugal in early 2000, wanting a change of scenery. At the time, I was working in property and living in Tufnell Park, in North London, and fancied a different way of life. Living in Tufnell Park for a year, having moved from Devon, England, for a year was a fantastic experience. This particular neighborhood is like a little village in busy London. I’d traveled a lot beforehand but decided on Portugal because I’d never been there before and wanted to be close to beaches. I love the sea and the sea view. I first lived in the

Algarve, southern Portugal, in an area called, Praia da Luz, then Lagos and Alvor. After five years, I moved to Madeira, which is a beautiful Portuguese island and I lived there for a further two years. I lived with my then girlfriend while in the Algarve, and our beautiful baby daughter was born there. She will be 13 years old in August and now lives in Bridport, Dorset, in the southwest of England.

WG: What were you doing before you started writing?

DP: I was living in Portugal and had several jobs, in real estate, selling advertising for an English newspaper called *Get Real*, we also had a radio show, which was great fun, and also selling page one Google ranking

advert. But my final job before I left Portugal to return to England was working for a luxury timeshare company. It was during my time in Portugal that I started to write a blog, which is still going and with over 780K views, [HERE](https://davidpperlmutter.blogspot.com/) (https://davidpperlmutter.blogspot.com/), and I started to write about a trip to Marbella in 1991, which, if you have read the story, was exceptionally harrowing. Writing the blog post about the events was some sort of therapy. I sent a blog post or two to a friend and editor, and she replied, "David, this is far too good for a blog, write a book." The rest is history.

WG: I see that you tweet about your mom. What does she think about your profession?

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DP: I tweet about my mum because she is an inspiration to me and all my five siblings. She's 87 years old, had six kids in eleven years, when she was much younger, of course, lives on her own, never complained at all during the Covid lockdowns, and is a Facebook queen. She is very proud of my work, as she is very proud of all my siblings. I am her favorite author, but she does adore Anthony Horowitz, which he is fully aware of. Saying that, sometimes I feel I come a close second to Anthony. But I don't mind, I've met Anthony, who was an inspiration, a legend, and an all-around wonderful chap.



Fans on a train with DP

WG: You are dyslexic. When did you first realize that and how has it impacted you as a writer? What do you do to get around that?

DP: I always knew I had some sort of impediment with reading and writing, but it was never diagnosed when I was at school, as it wasn't really a thing 43 years ago, and teachers just thought I was stupid, plus I was bullied by my peers for it. I only knew the seriousness of my dyslexia, a word I still struggle to spell, when I started to write my first book, 'Wrong Place Wrong Time'. Before I sent the manuscript to my then editor, I would re-read what I had written and couldn't believe the incorrect spelling and grammar. Now my editor is my partner Julie, and thankfully she understands my writing and my problem. "It's a good job I speak Dave," she frequently says. I must say it is very frustrating when I write a word, which to me looks correct, and then she points out that it isn't. Also, when I start a sentence or paragraph and if one word is spelled incorrectly, I have to start that sentence or paragraph again, not just delete that one word. That is the magnitude of my problem.

WG: You recently worked with Idris Elba, driving him in a golf cart for a Booking.com commercial. How was it filming with him, and do you think he will be the next 007?

DP: I love James Bond, in fact, at the age of 11, I made my own James Bond gadget case which I mentioned in another of my true stories, '13', chronicling four significant events, three of which were very dramatic, which I experienced when I was 13!

James Bond is a huge part of my life. I've seen every film more than three or four times. James Bond also gets a mention in the books 'Wrong Place Wrong Time' and my crime fiction trilogy. Some might say

I'm a little obsessed. Come to think of it, Idris Elba also gets a mention in the trilogy. I think Idris would make a great James Bond.

As for working with him when we filmed the Booking.com commercial, it was something I will never forget. He is a star, a Hollywood star, and it was an incredible experience.

I've written a blog post about my time on set with Idris for Stage 32, the huge platform for anyone in the movie business, which can be found [HERE](https://www.stage32.com/blog/3054) <https://www.stage32.com/blog/3054> Stage 32 is a FREE platform with OVER 800,000 members. I recommend anyone in the film industry to join. It's a fantastic platform for networking, promoting your projects, and being recognized.

I just want to add that my favorite James Bond is SEAN CONNERY!

WG: What do your (4) kids think about their dad as a writer?

DP: My four children, 28, 27, 26, and 13, I have two grandchildren too, are very proud of their dad, as indeed I am of them. They are looking forward to being extras in the movie of 'Wrong Place Wrong Time', which the Executive Producers, Golden Mile Productions, No Reservations, and Mark Foligno, and our Hollywood director are planning to film in early 2023.

WG: You are an Ambassador for Cancer Research UK. How did that come about, and what was the draw for you?

DP: My girlfriend, Julie, was an ambassador before we got together in memory of her father who died from cancer. As I, too, lost my father to cancer, joining her as a cancer campaigns ambassador was a good way of turning a tragedy into something positive, working on campaigns to help reduce the needless loss of life due to smoking-related illness. We have been to the Houses of Parliament on many occasions for campaigning and were there only a couple of weeks ago for a SMOKE-FREE UK campaign meeting with our local MP,



Matthew Offord who pledged his support to the campaign. I've also raised money for the charity by doing numerous charity book signing events.

WG: What is a typical writing day like for you? Do you enjoy the

process?

DP: I haven't got a typical writing day. I do love to write at night and into the early hours of the morning, with a glass of red wine or whisky, but as I act out the scenes while I am writing and say all the dialogue out loud, I have to bear in mind my family sleeping. So most of the time I write in the morning to late afternoon. I don't have a process; I just go with the flow. I do have music playing in the background when I

write. If I need some inspiration, I don't read a book; I watch a well-written TV show.

WG: Your partner Julie is also your editor. Does that complicate the working relationship and how do you handle differences in editorial opinions from her that you may disagree with?

DP: Yes, Julie has been my editor since my second book. I'm writing #16 now, although she did re-edit 'Wrong Place Wrong Time' a few years ago. She is a fantastic editor who has edited a few other authors' books, even though she has a very demanding full-time job in PR and Corporate Social Responsibility for a flexible workspace company in the City of London called



MP, Matthew Offord, Julie (Editor and Partner), DP

BE Offices. As I've said before, she understands my writing and my dyslexia. We have situations where she feels some of my wording shouldn't be in the story, and sometimes I agree with her, but sometimes I go against her will, and we work out how to keep it in.

The thing is, I have my own style of writing, and sometimes she doesn't like certain things, but we can usually come to an agreement after I've thrown my toys out of the pram, but then calmed down and collected them all back in. For example, she isn't the biggest fan of my crime fiction trilogy. The plot is about a debt-ridden author who commits a heinous crime for money and then writes about the murder and the events thereafter, and that book then becomes a bestseller. Like a book within a book. Julie doesn't like that the main character is an author and thinks that I've based his character very much on myself. I must say there is some truth in that, but I'm pleased to say not at all regarding the crime. Happily, the response from readers to my crime fiction trilogy has been incredible, with many readers wanting to see it made into a TV series.

As I'm writing this, a script-writer, producer and director, Michael Gorman from Kat Harvey Films in America, is writing a pilot which will be pitched to TV production companies. My aim is to have it featured on Netflix, Paramount, Apple, HBO, or any channel which will option my crime fiction series.

As well as on Amazon and social media, I'm overwhelmed by the response to the trilogy on my blog, with over 220 reviews and over 260K views to this

ONE blog post, which includes the first three chapters of book one, [Write to Kill](https://davidperlmutter.blogspot.com/2020/08/read-first-three-chapters-of-write-to.html) [HERE](https://davidperlmutter.blogspot.com/2020/08/read-first-three-chapters-of-write-to.html) <https://davidperlmutter.blogspot.com/2020/08/read-first-three-chapters-of-write-to.html>

WG: Are you good at accepting criticism?

With all the adoration of your work, does it make accepting criticism harder?

DP: When I first clicked the self-publish link on Amazon for my first book, 'Wrong Place Wrong Time', my friend and then editor warned me, "David, be prepared for some negative reviews because of the nature of the story." At first, the negative reviews did get to me, especially some of the names I've been called, but not now. I've learned to be thick-skinned, and I'm pleased to say that the positive reviews completely outweigh the negative reviews. Saying that, one one-star review from a reader in America made me laugh out loud. I tweet about it quite often. This is part of the review that made me laugh, "I was expecting an Ernest Hemingway travelog, but all I got was Austin Powers on vacation."

Yeah Baby. . .

WG: Would you rather be considered financially successful as an author but thought of as more of a hack, or financially unsettled but considered a brilliant writer?

DP: The latter for sure, and that is closer to the truth if my bank balance is anything to go by, as my editor so kindly just pointed out. To be considered a brilliant writer would make all the hard work of writing and lack of funds worth it.

WG: Books & Pieces Magazine likes to help newer authors. What advice would you have for them, and what pitfalls did you wish you had learned earlier?

DP: Whenever I'm asked this question, I

always give the same answer. WRITE FOR YOURSELF and no one else. I haven't faced any pitfalls to learn from apart from being dyslexic and perhaps wrongly assuming that writing a fiction series would be the same process as writing a true story. A true story flows because it is a retelling of actual events, whereas a work of fiction requires much more plotting and forethought. Many authors say that to be a great author, one should read many books. The thing is, I'm not a reader, yes, that may sound crazy, an author that doesn't read. I prefer to write than read.

WG: If you could go back and avoid the problems that resulted in the novels being written, would you?

DP: No way. I have led an eventful life and still do, and without these events, I wouldn't have started to write. I now have four true stories published, and the producers of 'Wrong Place Wrong Time' would like to make further movies of my stories, especially Five Weeks, which is about a trip to America in 1987, where I was nearly left for dead in a Pennsylvanian wood. So, even though I've faced life-threatening situations in three out of four of my true stories, no, I wouldn't go back.

WG: Tell me about your Bollywood experiences?

DP: You've done your research, William. I'm very impressed. As I've said, as well as being an author, I am an extra and supporting artist. The three Bollywood movies I have appeared in are on Amazon Prime. They are '83', 'Darbar' and 'Barun Rai and the House on the Cliff', where I played a

corpse. People might think it's easy playing dead, but having to keep still and silent for one minute or so is not that easy, especially when you have to do several takes, and sometimes with an itchy nose.

I must add that I love being part of creative projects, and I'm honored to have been featured in several movies, TV series, music videos, and many commercials, and along the way I've met many famous people. I just get so starstruck...

Next month I will be going to the first London screening of 'I Do Not Exist' in which I play a murder victim, and 'Memoirs of a Dying Man', which is another movie in which I play a murder victim. I get shot in the head.

WG: Do you write screenplays? If not, is that something that interests you?

DP: I would love to, but writing screenplays requires a skill set that I have yet to acquire, and certainly, an author shouldn't write the screenplay for one of their books. Hence Michael is writing the pilot of my crime fiction series. I will one day. It's something that I would love to do.

WG: What's your favorite quote?

DP: I love a good TV series, my favorites being 'Succession,' 'Mad Men,' 'Breaking Bad,' and 'Better Call Saul.' There are so many great quotes in them, but if I had to single one out, it would be, "I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger." From Breaking Bad, of course.

WG: Anything else you would like to share that I have not asked? Events, releases etc.

DP: With 'Wrong Place Wrong Time' hopefully filming in early 2023, and with my crime fiction series being pitched for a TV series, I'm just looking forward so much to seeing either or both projects come to fruition, particularly as my readers want so desperately to see them come to a big or small screen.

Find David at:

Blog:

<https://thewrongplaceatthewrongtime.blogspot.com/>

Facebook (Movie page):

<https://www.facebook.com/MovieWrongPlaceWrongTime/>

Instagram:

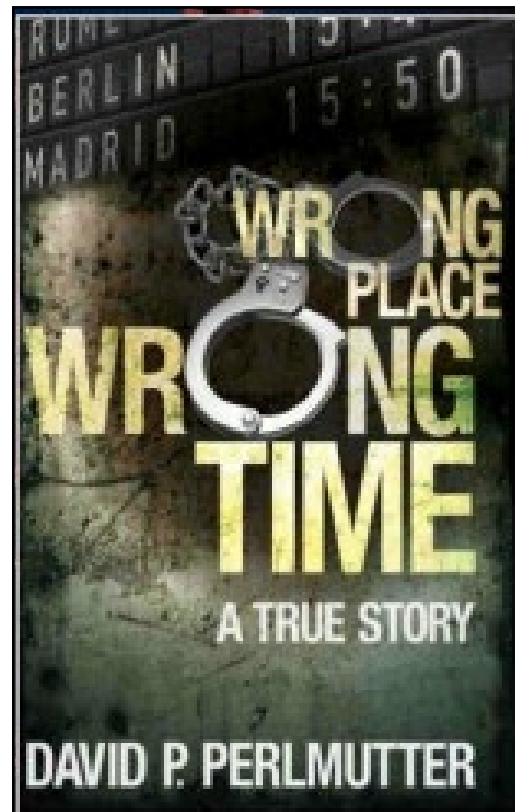
<https://www.instagram.com/davidpperlmutter/>

Amazon Author Page:

<https://amzn.to/3zkieo0>

LinkedIn:

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/davidpperlmutter/>



Read a sample of 'Wrong Place Wrong Time' later in this issue.

A CONVERSATION WITH...

Mack Little

Diversity, Tenacity & Life Experiences

Mack Little holds an undergraduate in English Literature from the University of Dubuque, Iowa and a Masters of Information Science from the University of North Texas. Born in Conyers, GA, Mack has gone on to live, as a University Student in Seville, Spain and, as a soldier, in Wurzburg, Germany. Her studies and career has taken her and all over the United States. She now resides in Houston, Texas.

WG: You've had quite a diverse range of experiences growing up, from your birth in Georgia, to studying International Politics in Seville, Spain. Living in Germany and traveling throughout Europe in the Army. How did all these experiences shape you as an author, and does it make you feel that you've experienced things not so many of

your readers may have?

Traveling and experiencing different cultures has definitely had an impact on my writing both philosophically and literally. Living amongst people with values, lifestyles, and customs different from what I grew up with allowed me to see that the perceptions instilled in me are not absolute. I have come to view the things that go on in my society as well as history from as many angles as possible and not just the ones that I was taught in school. I feel like my travels have given me a sense of objectivity when observing unfamiliar things in other cultures.

ML: In my writing, this is my approach as well in portraying a character's point of view or dealing with different societies. I hope to encourage my readers to view lives from a different perspective and hopefully challenge their perceptions and previous judgments. I'd love it, also, if my work sparked conversations.

As for the literal impact of my travels, I have stumbled upon actual place and histories that are not well known but fascinating. I enjoy bringing such things to light.

WG: When did you decide to start writing,



and how did you begin?

ML: I've always been a daydreamer, but sometime in middle school. I began to write my musings down. I found it quite cathartic. Writing became a wonderful release for me. Also, as an avid reader of horror, romance, and adventure, I rarely if ever found characters that looked like me or shared a similar background. It was as if people like me didn't exist and if we did, we were inconsequential.

So, I wrote stories that I enjoyed with not only a protagonist that looked like me but also reflected the diverse world that I lived in. That's how I started writing but I wanted to do it better. My whole impetus for going to college was to learn how to be a better writer. I studied other writers (and still do). Still, I felt I lacked the life experience to make it feel authentic. Traveling, I found, introduced me to adventure and struggle as well as beauty and wonder. I think that traveling, as much as any of my other life experiences, made me the writer I wanted to be.

WG: Your first novel 'Progenie' and 2022 Hawthorne Prize winning 'Daughters of Hades' have common themes of highlighting underrepresented and marginalized people. What brought you to

this focus and why?

ML: The stories I enjoyed reading never envisioned someone like me as the hero or the object of love and admiration. Could someone who looked like me ever be desired? Could someone with my

background ever save the day? I wanted to create worlds where marginalized populations could see themselves reflected and I wanted to give them value.

Conversely, I want readers who are not persons of color to recognize the humanity of people whose lifestyles diverge from the mainstream and I want to do that without relying on the victimization of the marginalized. My goal is not just to show a different perspective

but to allow my readers to relate to people they have always considered as "other".

Also, there is authenticity in including marginalized people and cultures. They exist! And they have existed throughout history and they have added value to the world. However, mainstream storytellers and historians have omitted them or otherwise diminished them.

In 'Progenie' I depicted a black woman who is smart, strong, beautiful, and



loveable despite her flaws. And in the historical storyline of the novel, a woman of color successfully ruled a prosperous kingdom. I want my readers to see that.

In ‘Daughter of Hades,’ I hoped to show the humanity of Africans in the new world. Slaves were not just slaves. They were mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. They were warriors, teachers, healers, artisans, mathematicians, and scientists. They were humans with value who were enslaved. They were survivors, heroes. They endured so that I could exist.

As for the Pirates, they were not just thieves and cut-throats. They battled an unjust economic system. Piracy was a remedy for an unequal society. Daughter of Hades also depicts same-sex relationships as they would have existed in the 17th century

WG: Your themes are also pirates, slavery, history in a fantasy fiction setting, with the Caribbean and its history as a backdrop. What drew you to these?

ML: Stories that were already in existence sparked my imagination. Characters, directions of storylines, and historical details that felt were missing gave me the seminal ideas for the stories I created.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer inspired Zenobia Grant, a heroic woman of color. It was something I longed to see. Not only that, but the idea of demons also intrigued me

and led me to grimoires that listed the demons and their abilities and histories. The study of demons led me to research how they were represented in different religions. I ended up with a rich demon/vampire lore.

As a teen, I LOVED historical romance novels and I accepted that all the stories out were about white women getting their groove on with nobles, with Native Americans. One novel even had a secondary plotline with a white woman with a quadroon—that was progress, at least. But I gave up on the genre and I outgrew it, I think. Then I read a novel by Alyssa Cole with a female POC as the romantic lead and a well-researched novel. I LOVED IT! I wanted more but there weren’t many novels of that genre as well-written as hers.



Then I found ‘Outlander.’ It is a wonderfully well-research series. And I have convinced myself that the main character has a black parent with her unruly black curly hair and nice round bottom. Anyway, I wanted to emulate the care given to research and create unambiguously black characters in a historical romance. So basically, I wrote the stories I wanted to read.

WG: What’s your writing day like? Equipment?

ML: During the work week, I have a day job. Immediately, after I clock out, I set up my writing area on my back porch, line up my cigar—I’m not allowed to smoke in the house—and maybe a glass of wine. Then I make sure there’s ink in my fountain pen.

When I'm all set, I sit for the next three to four hours and write longhand as I smoke and drink. On the weekend I type what I have been writing all week.

WG: Best and worst things about writing?

ML: Sometimes there is agony deciding which direction to take the storyline of a particular character or how to get to a particular plot point. And it's hard to let go when I choose the wrong direction. But as in painting, there are no mistakes. I simply take the unusable sections and save them to be recycled into other scenes.

I love editing. When I write longhand, I let go of all expectations of good writing or how eloquent my prose is. I just write. It's like I create this ball of clay, then when I sit to type I shape the story. I do my research to verify historical details and I refine my prose.

WG: What's next?

ML: I have a novella coming out in the Spring. It follows the life of Badu, a privileged enslaved man. We see his life in pre-colonial Africa before his is taken by the slavers in parallel to his escape to freedom from slavery in Barbados.

I am also in the beginning stages of research for a novel that focuses Lei, the main character in *Daughter of Hades*, and his history as it relates to the Asian population in colonial Mexico.

WG: Tell us about your community theatre experiences and how you got into that?

ML: Acting, and performing was my

first love. As a child, I studied acting and dancing. At age 16 I auditioned and became a part of the Atlanta Street Theater under the direction of Kenneth Leon. That was my first time performing. Gradually, I began to shift my focus to writing which I loved just as much. But I still love playing make-believe and being on stage. I performed in college productions and later community theater. What I've learned from acting has been invaluable as it helps me deal with anxiety when I come in contact with the public. It taught me to create an avatar that is confident and outgoing.

WG: What message do you have for other writers out there starting out?

ML: I only hope that the stories I write someday provide a springboard for other writers to tell stories that feature the under-represented in literature. As a straight black woman, I realize I may have some limitations in creating authentic LGBTQ+ characters. As a Black woman, there may be some aspects of Asian culture that I have not been able to tap into. I am ready to receive criticism so that I can learn how to do better with cultures and histories that I don't have experience with but I would also like to see more stories from the under-represented themselves. And it's my wish that more mainstream writers take my stories as a cue to be more inclusive with their writing.

Mack Little Website –

<http://www.mack-little.com/>

Facebook Author Page –

<https://www.facebook.com/authormacklittle>

Twitter – <https://twitter.com/authMackLittle>

Read a sample of 'Daughter of Hades' in this issue.

SHORT STORY

We Regret to Inform You....

by David Sheskin

This morning I received another rejection slip. This makes forty-nine times that ‘The Anorexic Analyst’ has been turned down. And what of ‘The Libra Who Loved Lean Cuisine?’ Well, it has been rejected on thirty-five occasions, or is it thirty-four?

And then there is my favorite story, ‘The Henpecked Hippopotamus,’ a charming but ironical exposition on the eccentricities of puberty. For some inexplicable reason this little gem has been returned to me nineteen times. But why go on? The fact of the matter is, the rejections are finally getting to me.

I am a writer. At least I like to think I am. But to be perfectly honest, it gets harder and harder to nurture that particular belief when every week approximately fourteen more rejection slips arrive in the mail. Most of the time the slips consist of impersonal replies printed on small slips of paper. On rare occasions some editor notes in script something to the effect that my story contained some interesting ideas or that he found it humorous, and that he’d be interested in seeing some more of my work. But, more often than not, the editors say nothing. Some, in fact, don’t even bother to include a rejection slip, and this is something I find particularly annoying.

Since embarking on this ludicrous adventure I’ve always harbored the belief that it is equitable to expect reimbursement for one’s efforts. In view of this, until recently it has been my policy to submit my work only to those publications which offer one remuneration. But I must admit that over the past few months my resolve has weakened. After one thousand two hundred and fifty-two rejection slips even the best of men are forced to

compromise their standards. And, of course, there was also my wife — a pragmatic woman who earns her living counseling deranged human beings, and passes her spare time in front of an easel immersed in the complexities of Chinese painting. Night after night she told me that my first priority should be to get published, and not any monetary gains that might accrue from my efforts. Finally I buckled under the pressure of her logic — but in all frankness, since my reluctant acquiescence to the prospect of publication without compensation, things have not improved. And because of this I have now reached the point where I am willing to do anything to get into print. So I swallow my pride and send one particular manuscript, which by now is all yellowed and dog eared, to an obscure little biannual which only pays in contributor’s copies. The address of this little publication is some communal farm located outside of Walla Walla, Washington, which happens to be run by an ex-alcoholic who spends the better part of his waking hours milking cows, growing pot, and reading the literary creations of would-be writers who have exhausted all other avenues of expression. Six months later this so-called editor sends me a letter (which I swear is soiled with the milk of some four legged animal) that says I certainly have an interesting head, and that he’d really like to publish my story, but unfortunately ‘The Hypotenuse of Madame Curie’s

Nose' is a bit too wordy and far too esoteric for a modest little publication such as his. And he suggests that I really shouldn't be too upset by his letter because anybody who writes the way I do certainly has talent and is bound to get published sooner or later. And, by the way, he tells me, if I ever happen to be passing through the Pacific Northwest make sure to stop by the farm and say hello. To this I say — oink, oink.

And that is how things are.

But I digress, for as I sit here attacking the keys of my word processor, I can see our mailman winding his way up the driveway, and in his hands are two large manila envelopes, both of which undoubtedly contain manuscripts which my wife and I, as well as an assorted number of friends and relatives, believe to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant publication. I meet him at the door.

"Well, it looks like someone's returning a few more of your stories Mr. Darling. Must get pretty frustrating getting all them rejection letters."

"Yeah, it is Mr. Barton, but as long as a man has his health and family, well, what the hell, you know, a person can live with anything."

I must admit that I have a certain degree of hostility toward this man, who since I have known him always seems to have been the bearer of bad news. Somehow, unbeknownst to me, he has discovered the fact that I am a writer, and in all likelihood he imagines that I am not a very good one, or why would all my manuscripts be returned to me?

I watch this aging servant of communication head across the street to a large white house which belongs to one Stanley J. Parkinson, who also just happens to be a writer — but one who rarely gets rejection slips. Of course, this information has been volunteered to me by Mr. Barton, who also provides me with reports detailing the specifics of Mr. Parkinson's success. Naturally I accept all of what Barton tells me, since I have read much of what Par-

kinson has written, and must in all candor admit that the man is a talented writer, although I don't believe him to be quite as blessed as I am with a gift for being glib. Suddenly I decide this thing has gone far enough. Isn't it sufficiently distressing that I must suffer the indignity of rejection almost daily? Why, on top of everything else, should the man who delivers my mail, a man who is prone to chattering idly, be allowed to harbor the impression (which, no doubt, he communicates to others) that I am something of an incompetent when it comes to the art of self-expression? So I act. Opening the door, I flag old Barton down.

"Hey Barton!"

"You call me Mr. Darling?"

"Yeah, come back here a minute."

And as the old fart trudges his way back up my driveway I hurriedly open one of the manila envelopes he has handed to me, and observe that *The Crime and Grime Review* has returned to me 'These Pipes Are Not for Smoking,' a short but pithy piece on crime in the sewers. Stuffing the rejection slip into my pocket, I hold out the manuscript to my mailman.

"Hey Barton, I'd like you to read one of my stories."

"Well. . . heck, why would you want me to do something like that?"

"Look, you just take the story and read it and let me know what you think of it. Okay?"

And I shove it into his hand. Reluctantly he takes the manuscript and deposits it inside his jacket. Although the bastard will probably fold, mutilate, and spindle my work, not to mention drip all varieties of liquids upon it, I really don't believe that having to type over an eleven page manuscript is too great a price to pay to obtain the respect of one's mailman — especially if he is one who disseminates information regarding one's professional competence to such persons as Stanley J. Parkinson.

Closing the door behind me I notice that the second of the manila envelopes which Barton

has given me is unusually light. Could it be it is a letter of acceptance, and that instead of using an envelope bearing its own letterhead, this particular magazine informs you by inserting the good news in your own self-addressed stamped envelope? So I open what the mailman has given me, only to find one piece of paper upon which is written in blue India ink the following statement.

In this country the good writer does get read . . . I don't believe that there are better writers than Hemingway, Faulkner, Cozzens, and I pining away in Brown County, Indiana, or in the espresso joint on Third Street, or on the faculty of East South Dakota A & M. Good writers get published, and they then cease to be somewhat unknown.
~John O'Hara

Since beneath the script there are some colorful depictions of birds and flowers in what by now is an already familiar

Chinese style, I immediately know who had played this cruel prank on me. Hours later, after the two of us have vigorously debated the wisdom of her delivering advice in the form of literary banalities sent through the mail, my spouse succeeds in convincing me that perhaps it would be best if I took a more assertive stance and attempted to get some constructive feedback on my work from a credible source. In view of this, I take it upon

myself to place a phone call to Roger Ballantine, fiction editor of *Audacity*, a high-powered magazine to which I have sent approximately twenty-four manuscripts during the past four years. After a considerable amount of persuasion I convince two secretaries and one associate editor that it is urgent that I speak to Mr. Ballantine.

Finally he comes on the line

"Look Mr. Darling, I'm a very busy man. Exactly why are you calling me?"

"I am calling you Mr. Ballantine because ev-



ery time I send a manuscript to your magazine it is returned to me within three weeks with the same form letter attached to it informing me that unfortunately it doesn't meet your present needs. To pursue things further Mr. Ballantine, every time I send that same manuscript to a magazine published by one of your colleagues I receive a similar reply. I am forty-five years old, sir, and have always been considered by people who know me

to be both a bright and articulate individual. For years my friends suggested to me that I should take up writing since I happen to have a real flair for the English language. But after four years of constant work, what do I have to show for my efforts? I'll tell you what — one thousand two hundred and fifty-two rejection slips and more than one thousand canceled stamps I have removed from self-addressed stamped envelopes which have contained some eighty-five different manuscripts, all of which have been returned to me innumerable times by all varieties of publications.

"So the reason I am calling you Mr. Ballantine is to ask you what the hell is wrong with my stories! And if you're going to tell me that you're too busy to critique each and every story you receive or that you don't read most of the stories yourself, well, I do not consider those to be acceptable responses."

"I see . . . I . . . well, I don't know quite what to say to you. But the fact is I really don't recall any of your work offhand."

"Then you yourself do read all the manuscripts your publication receives?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I read them all from start to finish."

"Mr. Ballantine, would it be possible for you to read my next manuscript from start to finish, and then take a few minutes to document your perceptions of it using such things as nouns and verbs, but especially adjectives and adverbs to communicate to me exactly what is lacking? In fact Mr. Ballantine, according to my records I sent a manuscript to your office four days ago, and thus it should be on your desk right now or within the next few days. This latest effort of mine is entitled 'The Passion of Naomi Wilderness' and is a twenty-four pages in length. I would really appreciate it if you would record your impressions of it using a minimum of two hundred words, and relay this information to me within the next week or so in order that I might begin immediately to make the appropriate modifications in my

style of writing."

"Mr. Darling, I realize you're quite upset, but at the same time I can't allow you to coerce me into treating you differently than I would anyone else who submits to us. I will, however, watch for your story, and if we can't use it I'll attempt to make a few comments. That's all I can tell you right now. I have to hang up since I have a great deal of work to do. Good day."

Dear Editor,

This form should be discarded in the event the attached manuscript is accepted for publication. If, on the other hand, the manuscript is rejected, the author would appreciate it if you took a few minutes to answer the questions below which attempt to identify those critical variables responsible for its rejection. By doing this you will provide the author with information that will allow him to become a better writer, and thereby in the future better serve your publication and others similar to it. It is essential that you respond to all items and that you be completely honest in your responses.

*Respectfully,
Douglas Darling*

1. Please state the name and position of the person who has read the enclosed manuscript and is filling out this questionnaire.
2. How much of the manuscript did you read?
a) I did not read beyond the first page; b) more than one page but less than four pages; c) most of the manuscript; d) all of the manuscript
3. Is the content of the manuscript what you consider appropriate for your publication?
Yes _____ No _____
(If your answer was no, indicate briefly why

you consider it to be inappropriate.)

4. Would you say that you read the manuscript: a) casually — browsed over it; b) moderately carefully; c) extremely carefully

5. Which of the following alternatives would best describe your feelings at the time you read the manuscript? a) I was tired from having read many other manuscripts; b) I was tired or not feeling well because of factors other than reading manuscripts; c) I felt okay, but was not as alert as I could have been; d) I felt extremely alert.

6. I would place this manuscript in/at the ___% of all manuscripts received by our publication. a) top 1%; b) top 10%; c) top 25%; d) about the 50th percentile; e) below the 50th percentile

7. Using the scales below indicate for each of the adjective word pairs the numerical value which you believes comes closest to describing this manuscript. If for any word pair the adjectives are not applicable, place a check in the parenthesis under the column marked A. If for a given word pair you are unable to respond as a result of not having read enough of the manuscript, place a check in the parenthesis under the column marked B.

	(A)		(B)
a) boring	1..2..3..4..5		interesting
b) humorous	1..2..3..4..5		lacking in humor
c) professional	1..2..3..4..5		unprofessional
d) believable	1..2..3..4..5		unbelievable
e) fluid style	1..2..3..4..5		labored writing
f) neat appearance	1..2..3..4..5		sloppy
g) imaginative	1..2..3..4..5		unimaginative
h) provocative	1..2..3..4..5		unprovocative
i) predictable	1..2..3..4..5		unpredictable

8. Please note any additional comments you have concerning the manuscript below.

Thank you for your time and effort.

Hey, you say you don't believe it? You say you don't think that anyone would have the gall or stupidity or whatever you want to call it to send something like that to an editor every time he sends out one of his stories. Then you obviously don't know me. Look, my wife is thrilled, and frankly I am more than a bit curious about the types of responses I will get. Of course, there is the not-too-remote possibility that I am committing professional suicide, but what the hell, I am willing to take my chances and hope that, at the very least, certain people have a sense of humor. And anyway, this sudden passion I have for feedback has improved my marriage considerably, since the wife for the first time actually believes she is using her therapeutic skills productively on me. And this is a smart woman. Of this I am finally convinced. Why, if it had not been for her I'd have added one final item to my questionnaire—an inquiry concerning the last time the respondent had experienced an orgasm which was the direct result of he or she having engaged in sexual intercourse. You see, I have always subscribed to the belief that if one is horny one is bound to be hypercritical. Yet my wife has persuaded me to confine such theories to my fiction. And I have agreed to listen to this woman for at least a few more weeks.

Old Barton does not say much to me these days. It has now been a week since I handed him my manuscript. On Monday he nodded to me and on Wednesday when he saw me looking out of our bay window he winked. He gives no hint by the expression on his face on whether or not he has read my manuscript, and if he has what he thinks of it. I have decided that I will wait a total of four weeks before broaching the subject with him. This is the length of time one would expect to elapse before one would hear from any efficiently run literary magazine that was the recipient of a

relatively small number of submissions.

So as I wait Barton out I sit at home during the day absorbed in my craft. Although my wife has suggested that I refrain from passing out other manuscripts to our letter carrier, I cannot help myself when the pest control man comes to our house this afternoon to deal with an infestation of ants. His name is Trevor and he is a gaunt looking man with a long, greasy ponytail. On both of his arms as well as his neck there are numerous tattoos that appear quite stark against the pale tone of his skin. I have only met him once before today, yet that one time we exchanged words I came away with the impression he was moderately literate. So as he crouches in the basement attempting to annihilate a colony of ants, I approach him.

“Trevor, I was wondering if you could do me a favor?”

“Exactly what do you want man?”

“Well, you see, I’m a writer, and I’d like to find out what all different kinds of people think of the stuff I write. So maybe you could take this story I’ve written with you and give it back to me the next time we see one another?”

By this time the two of us have climbed up the basement stairs and made our way to the front door. As the man looks at me with a somewhat puzzled expression on his face, I offer him a photocopy of *Spirochetes in the Springtime*.

“Why don’t you take it?”

“Sheet man, I ain’t got no time to read your stuff!”

“Look, just take it and if you get a chance look it over. I’d really appreciate it.”

So I stuff a fiver in his palm and suddenly he grabs the manuscript and without another word the man walks off to his truck. Luck would have it that old Barton just happens to be coming up the driveway at the moment Trevor reaches the street. Of course Barton can’t help but notice that our meter man

is carrying in his right hand something that appears to be a manuscript. Yet he makes no mention of this as he hands me one of my self-addressed stamped envelopes, and before he heads across to Parkinson’s house he speaks to me for the first time since I gave him my story.

“I guess you’ve probably heard that Parkinson’s going to Hollywood to make a movie out of one of his books?”

I just smile and quietly close the door.

It has now been two and one half weeks since I gave Barton my story. I do not discuss with my wife the fact that I am eagerly anticipating my mailman’s evaluation of my work. Of course I have not confided to her anything of my indiscretion with the exterminator.

This morning while I was delivering one of my manuscripts to the post office, a different letter carrier presented himself at our front door and handed to my wife a manila envelope which contained one of the feedback questionnaires I had attached to my manuscripts. Upon opening the envelope I observed that along with the standard rejection slip, which had been clipped to my story, an identical slip had been stapled to the questionnaire, and at the bottom of the second slip someone had scribbled, “Please do not send us more than one manuscript at a time!”

Last week I noticed that old Barton is no longer delivering our mail. It appears that he has been replaced by a younger man who seems reluctant to engage in any sort of conversation. Nevertheless, when I asked him what had become of his predecessor he told me that Barton had retired. Understandably, for the past few days I have tried (without success) to obtain Barton’s home address. When I confronted the local postmaster and told him that I gave the now defunct letter carrier one of my manuscripts, he looked at me in the most unusual way. All he would tell me was that it

was against department regulations to divulge the whereabouts of any of its employees. He made it a point to say that perhaps if it were an emergency he might make an exception, but in this instance obviously such a situation did not exist. Because of what has happened I really don't expect I'll see my manuscript again.

It is two weeks since I have learned of Barton's retirement and today *Audacity* returned to me 'The Passion of Naomi Wilderness.' The manuscript was the only thing in the envelope. For the first time since I have been dealing with them *Audacity* neglected to attach one of its silver and blue rejection slips to my story.

This past week has been, to say the least, frustrating. In addition to the *Audacity* rejection, I received two more manuscripts to which I had attached my feedback questionnaire. One of the forms was unmarked, while the other had written upon it in bold black magic marker, "Don't send us any more stories if you're going to enclose crap like this!"

It is June and more than three months have passed since I gave Barton my manuscript. Last week I received for the first time from *Audacity* a handwritten note attached to one of my stories. It read:

Mr. Darling,

Do not send us any more manuscripts. We will not read them. In fact, we won't even bother to return them to you.

Letters such as this are never signed.

A week before July fourth I receive a communication, from of all people, Barton. It arrives in a manila envelope with the copy of 'These Pipes Are Not for Smoking' which I handed to him some four months earlier. The communication is brief and consists of a message that is professionally printed on grey stationary, at the top of which are embossed

Barton's name and address. It reads:

Dear

THE ENCLOSED MANUSCRIPT HAS BEEN GIVEN THE MOST CAREFUL CONSIDERATION. WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT WE ARE UNABLE TO USE IT AT THIS TIME AND THAT THE VOLUME OF SUBMISSIONS PRECLUDES A MORE PERSONAL REPLY. WE HOPE THAT THIS WILL NOT DISCOURAGE YOU FROM SENDING US OTHER MATERIAL IN THE FUTURE

-Fiction Editor

Written at the bottom of this communication in a script I had seen many times on postage due envelopes was the message:

P.S.: Doug — In the future make sure to include a SASE with all manuscripts — S.O.B.

Probably because he is not due for at least two months, today the exterminator sent his son over to return my manuscript. This child, who most definitely has the face of his father, can be no older than ten. As he hands me a copy of 'Spirochetes in the Springtime' the boy says, "My daddy tells me to give you dis and dat you should make all dem correcshuns he puts on each page. Den everything'll be all right."

I am shocked to discover throughout my manuscript numerous scribblings in red ink. Although these scribblings suggest some changes I am not in complete agreement with, I decide in view of the fact that this is the only constructive feedback I have received in months I will take a chance and follow what undoubtedly is the advice of a thirty some year old exterminator who never got beyond the eighth grade. As soon as I have edited the manuscript as per his instructions I will submit it to *Flaming Libidos*.

This afternoon while browsing through some magazines at our local drugstore I happen to pick up the latest issue of Audacity, and notice that on page sixty-one someone by the name of Stephen O. Barton has published a fictional piece entitled 'These Pipes Are Not for Smoking.' On page four of the same magazine I observe a collection of pictures depicting all of the issue's contributors, and among them is a small black and white photograph of my ex-mailman. Adjacent to his picture is a brief biographical sketch that, among other things, documents his lack of previous literary accomplishment.

After weeks of frustration I have given up trying to convince certain people that I am the real author of 'These Pipes Are Not for Smoking.' My wife too has accepted the futility of the situation, and suggests that rather than harboring any hostility, I should profit from the experience and act more prudently in all my future dealings with postal workers.

Today I received the following letter from *Flaming Libidos*.

Dear Mr. Darling,

I am pleased to inform you that our editorial staff has decided to publish your recent short story submission entitled Spirochetes in the Springtime. As per the standard policy of our magazine, you will be paid \$500 for the manuscript. I would appreciate it if you would contact me immediately (please feel free to call collect) in order that we might expedite the details of this publication. Thank you.

Sincerely,

*Merril T. Carlson
Editor-in-Chief
Flaming Libidos*

This afternoon Trevor came once again to spray our basement and before he left I handed him a check for \$75. This was to reimburse him for the revisions he did on the Infatuations of an Amnesiac Misanthrope. I am proud to say that this particular manuscript, which his son returned to me last month, has already been accepted for publication in Viewpoints.

This man Trevor never says much to me. Sometimes I find it difficult to reconcile his taciturn disposition with his obvious editorial skills. Yet in spite of the fact the two of us seem to lack a real rapport, I am more than satisfied with his work, and hope that the money I give him during each of our encounters will be sufficient to sustain his interest in my work. I have already paid the man a total of \$385. This amount represents ten percent of my total sales to date.

Oh yes, before he left today I gave Trevor a copy of 'Afflictions of the Tropics and their Affinity to Sin, Desire and Natural Curiosity.' I believe it to be a good story, yet for some reason unbeknownst to me it always seems to have engendered the most negative of feelings among editors. Perhaps he will be able to identify the problem.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Sheskin is a writer and artist whose work has recently appeared in *The Dalhousie Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Stand Magazine*, *the Journal of Irreproducible Results*, *Permafrost*, *Gargoyle* and *Notre Dame Review*. Among his recent books are *Plaid Cats*, *Art That Speaks* and *David Sheskin's Cabinet of Curiosities*. A former university professor, he is also the author of *The Handbook of Parametric and Nonparametric Statistical Procedures*.

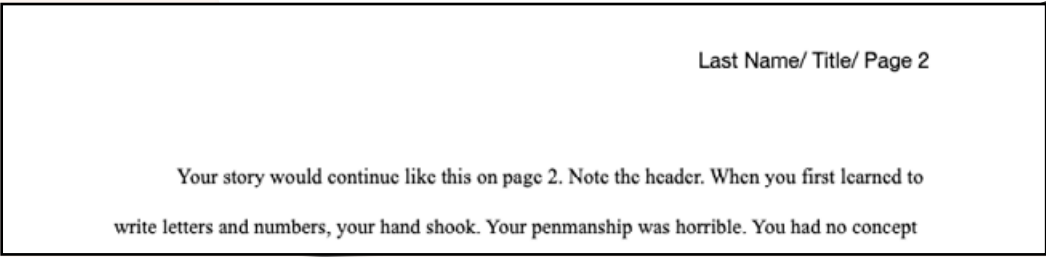
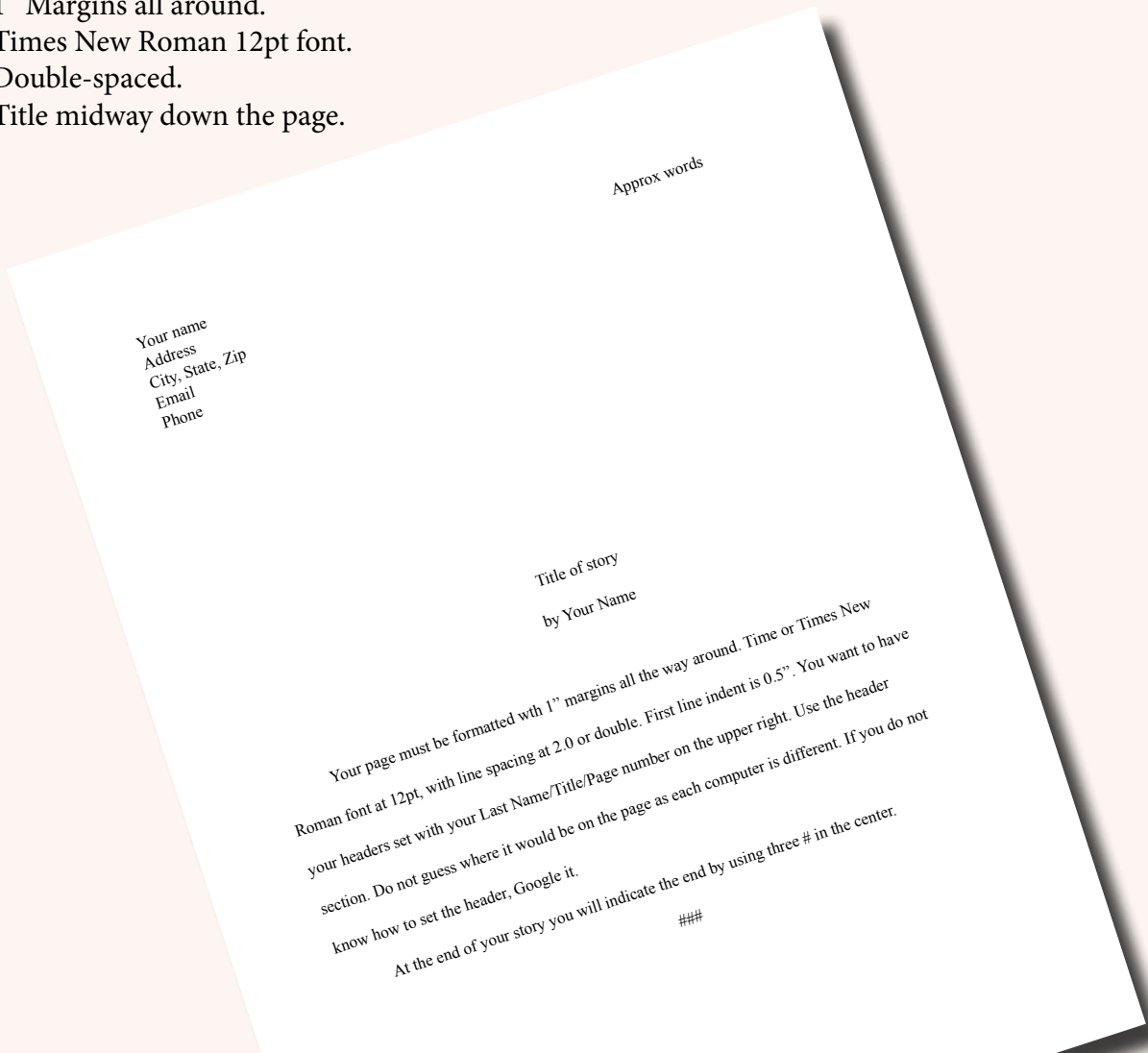
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Writing Tips

In this section you will find useful tips to help you on the journey toward publication. If you have some to share, please email them to Editor@BooksNPieces.com.

PROPER FORMATTING OF YOUR STORY IS CRUCIAL!

- 1" Margins all around.
- Times New Roman 12pt font.
- Double-spaced.
- Title midway down the page.



WHAT MAKES A GOOD SHORT STORY?

Go to any bookstore, or peruse Amazon, and you will find no shortage of instructional material teaching you how to be a good writer. But do these really help? To quote best-selling author Neil Gaiman: “Sooner or later, if you don’t give up and you have some measurable amount of ability or talent or luck, you get published.”

Too many people simply give up. They write a few short stories, get rejected, see no hope for the future and call it a day.

Let’s play with this concept a bit. Let’s assume your writing is terrible, your ideas boring and no one wants to read your work. Should you quit?

When you first learned to write letters and numbers, your hand shook. Your penmanship was horrible. You had no concept of spacing, or flow, style, or even pressure on the pencil for that matter. You wielded your pencil like a fork, stabbing at the letters you were tracing, your line not matching the one printed on the paper. What a disaster. You should just stop, give up on learning to write legibly. Right?

Your first bicycle. Training wheels were okay, but once they came off—it was the end of the world. Fear, anxiety, pain as you fell off. You should have just quit. But you didn’t.

Let’s return to writing the short story. You chose to do it for some reason only you understand. It is the same thing. You can learn form, copy style until you develop your own, come up with ideas from other ideas, after all there is no such thing as an original idea; they’re all variations on a theme. If you have the spark inside that makes you want to write, then you have all you need. The rest is time and practice, writing horrible things you will be embarrassed about later in life. But each horrible piece teaches you some-

thing. Each comment a reader gives, teaches you something. When you scour the works of other authors you find yourself admiring a turn of phrase, a word you never knew, a stylistic device that you incorporate into your own writing.

And like driving a car for the first hundred times—holding the steering wheel with a death grip, movements jerky, paranoid about everyone else to such an extreme that you’re drenched in sweat when you finally park—your writing also begins that way.

One day, after lots of practice, someone will like your work. And then the self-confidence improves along with the quality of your work. Ask any published author how long it took them, how many stories written before one stood out, and you will find that they all followed the same path.

We live in a time when struggle is no longer appreciated, when hurt feelings over struggles are met with false rewards and adjusted expectations. There are no adjustments you can make to make this journey easier. And even if there were, the satisfaction of the work you did, the effort put in, at the end of the journey, would be less had it been made easier.

What makes a good story? Perhaps Walter Wellesley “Red” Smith said it best in 1949: “Why no.... You simply sit down at the typewriter, open your veins, and bleed.”

Keep on writing!

5 DEADLY MISTAKES THAT GET YOUR STORY REJECTED

We get many submissions each month. And we read each of them, even if we know they will not make publication. As time has passed we know that there are at least FIVE deadly mistakes that new writers make, disqualifying them from serious consideration by most reputable publishing houses.

Why do we read them? Because we deal with a lot of new writers, where suggestions can be offered, where encouragement can be given, we like to do so. Often a story comes through that has the potential to be publishable. Perhaps it lacks in just a few areas. We like to offer the writer a chance to resubmit (often more than once), until we reach a point that we can accept it. Sometimes, we still cannot accept it after revisions. Many writers do not like the idea of rewrites and often fail to resubmit.

New writers are enamored with their work. An amazing number of first drafts are submitted riddled with spelling and punctuation errors, poor sentence structure, contradictory tenses.

Below are the five deadly mistakes we see the most.

#1 POOR PLOT:

Stories that begin at the beginning of a story arc, slowly and without a sense of urgency, often fail to make a reader continue.

Your story MUST grab from the first page, the first paragraph, and, if possible, the first line. Why would a reader waste time having to decipher your story?

#2 ALL NARRATIVE:

Many submissions come in as stories told, as though a narrator was reading. These stories have no dialog, no character descriptions, and with no dialog fail to show character traits through the dialog.

These stories are the most boring. As a reader I want to be able to “see” the story in my mind’s eye. Void of anything substantial from characterization and dialog, it is just like listening to someone talk endlessly.

#3 NO CONFLICT

Like the last complaint, a story without conflict is just not a story. Conflict is a difficult concept for new writers. They create their world, fall in love with their creation and hate to destroy it or change it in any way. As a result, with no conflict, nothing happens. Again the reader yawns. Yes, you may have created a lovely world, but it is also a boring world.

All stories need conflict, must be driven by conflict and should start with the conflict right there. Grab your readers and hold them. Add more layers of conflict so that the plot thickens and the reader is compelled to finish. Do not be afraid to break your world, hurt your characters. Through the story they will rise to the challenge or perish. Either way the reader will feel satisfied.

#4 STUPID CHARACTER NAMES

Unbelievably, many stories are submitted to us with character names that are ridiculous. Intended to be funny, light-hearted, or amusing, treating your characters like this destroys any interest the reader has to invest their time. Pola Rosensplatt, for example, or Harold Puffswiggins.

The power of your character lies in their backstory, their ordinary name that becomes extraordinary when they rise to the conflicts, and in their transitional story arc.

#5 POOR RESOLUTION/NO RESOLUTION

Inasmuch as a character must have a conflict, a story must have a decent ending. This does not mean your story must resolve, but the character must reach a point where the

story can be stopped, conflict handled, and with a good resolution.

Look at movies with sequels. Where did each end? Was it sequential or did it treat each film as a standalone? Your characters do not have to live happily ever after; but they must do something that indicates the story arc has been completed and this part closed. There is

nothing worse than a weak, or absent ending to your story. It leaves the reader feeling cheated after all the investment of their time.

These are just five of many problems that can result in your story being rejected. Have you noticed any of these in your stories?

I'll bet you have.

IT'S ALL BEEN DONE BEFORE

Let's face it; nothing is original. Stories have been passed along in one form or another for centuries. Early stories were passed down orally, from one generation to another. At some point new ideas were regurgitated old ideas, in the same way that movies seem to all be variations on a theme.

What's a writer to do?

Accept that the word 'unique' won't apply to your story; nonetheless you can present a story in a way that has the benefit of not being done before. This is because your stories and your characters are yours. Who can complain about that?

Offer me fun characters and a solid tale and I will get caught up in the book and forget that it might be like this other book, or that book, or reminds me of a short story I once read at school.

So perhaps it is not about uniqueness as much as it is about freshness, interesting presentations, unexpected turns and twists.

Screenwriters face this challenge. Having created a masterful story, they must pitch it to producers, people too busy to devote much thought. Making it a quick visual, the writer will often compare the story to movies that have been made before. "It's like Titanic meets Term of Endearment," he might say, evoking the huge tragedy with a personal loss so that the producer can quickly decide whether the idea has merit.

Book readers for publishers are the same. With lots of manuscripts coming in, a reader,

usually not paid a whole lot to care, must get through one pile before the next pile comes in. The reader won't compare your story to something else; instead, he reads the beginning and if you have done your job right, he has the urge to turn the page. If not, your hard work is summarily rejected and the reader moves on to the next manuscript on on the pile.

One of the mistakes new writers make is languishing in their opening. No one cares how pretty the sunset is, unless it is toxic and immediately kills the main character. No one cares if she woke up, her hair a mess and her makeup smeared, unless there is some relevance to the plot in a strong enough manner to incite the reader to turn the page.

In screenwriting there is an old saying. If there is a gun on the wall, someone needs to use it by the third act. In other words, don't tell me about the gun if it is just ornamental with no relevance to the plot.

After lots of time and effort, you manage to sell your book. Happily, the feedback never mentions the similarity to another book. Readers liked it and sales are good.

And yet somewhere, another writer starting out, having seen your book, is put off by the thought that you wrote a unique book, and anything they might do will be compared to your book. Exactly how you felt.

Write well. Do your best.

Write well. Do your best. Offer the reader a tight plot, solid characters and well paced and you will be fine.

WORDS MATTER, DON'T THEY?

Words matter to a writer and a reader. Not the words that you have to wonder whether politically correct or inclusive, but rather having a decent vocabulary and why it matters.

Without a contretemps over your noetic use of inchoate vocabulary, in your grandiloquent desire to impart a sense of magniloquence in your prose, it would be prodigious, and with presage, to initially evaluate your audience so as to avoid seeming didactic or pedantic.

Did you understand ALL of the above sentence? No matter, it was pompous. That said, there is a fine line between having an extended vocabulary with which to choose, or just being a pretentious twit. And therein lies the skill.

When I was thirteen I made an important decision. I knew that I needed to increase my vocabulary in order to sound more adult and less childlike. I made the decision to memorize the entire dictionary.

At thirteen years of age there is a sense of invincibility, as if a single leap could propel you skyward, defying the antagonism of gravity feverishly contradicting you. It did not seem an unreasonable task. I would learn a page of words every day until the task was a complete.

I began with the 'A' words.

That was a tough slog. I managed to get a few words down the page before I realized the futility of the task. Disappointed, I resolved to at least write down any words I encountered if I did not know the meaning. And from then on I kept a small notebook and faithfully jotted words I read, or words I heard, that I did not know. I would look them up, jot down the meaning and then write a sentence of my own so that I could use the word immediately.

Perfunctory. (adj) (of an action or gesture) carried out with a minimum of effort or reflection.

Me: With a perfunctory smile, he moved on to the next candidate in line.

Using this method you can increase your vocabulary quite extensively. You are, in fact, relying on other authors to teach you. And that's a point of pride. "So and so taught me the proper use of perfunctory."

Is this really important?

In our age of annotated slang (LOL, ROTFL) the desire to rise above mediocrity seems scant at best. When I was younger I read James Clavell, James Michener, and the novels of other authors whose works ran 1600 pages or more. These were voluminous works that not only captivated the reader, but also utilized a wider vocabulary so as not to be repetitive or dull.

These days very few authors write that much. And those with books that large have usually enlarged their font, expanded their margins, added extra leading and line spaces to such an extent that laid out like a Clavell novel, would barely reach 300 pages. It's a cheat designed to make the reader feel as if they had accomplished something.

And worse, reading these books, you find the vocabulary level holds at a fifth or sixth grade level, enamoring a wider audience who would otherwise be lost.

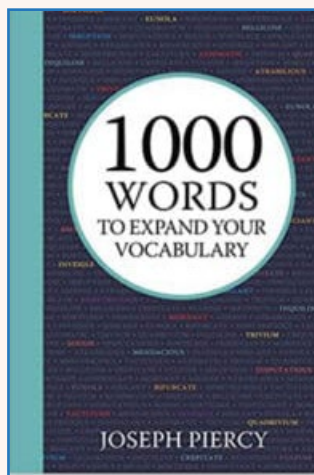
Right or wrong?

From a literate viewpoint, this adaptation to the poorest reader is wrong. For one thing, a reader would likely not be able to highlight unknown words as I had done. There is no challenge. From a sales viewpoint, this is of course a better approach—capture as wide a range of readership as possible. Of course I am surprised they don't throw in a few illustrations for good measure.

A better question might be whether you believe that we should push ourselves to new

heights, learn new skills, new words, more complex sentence structure in an effort to reach the heights of the former masters? Or whether we should just allow whatever level to be the level of choice, have no expectations, accept what is, fundamentally, a mediocrity, in the name of quick sales.

I ask that question because it parallels another point. Being on a bestseller list should mean that



you are a bestseller—as in high sales—shouldn't it?

That's a topic for another day. Meantime, be prodigious and excrete some superfluous ink drops. I recommend the book: '1000 Words to Expand Your Vocabulary' by Joseph Piercy. You can get it [HERE](#) (or click the book cover).

<https://amzn.to/3IVWlc0>

A THOUSAND-MILLION-BILLION REVISIONS IS NEVER ENOUGH FOR **THE LAST TYPO**

The draft has been edited, proofed, run through a myriad of software and human eyes, beta readers, advance reader copies, professional proofer, and my own fiftieth look at it—OMG I am so sick of looking at this manuscript—eyed more times than there are stars in the heavens, and it should be good to go, right?

WRONG!

There are still a billion errors, words that make no sense, that creep out the moment you feel good about the editing and proofing, revisions, and eyeballs that have seen your work.

AND THAT'S THE TRUTH ABOUT WRITING...

Even after the book has been published, glowing reviews obtained, signings and publicity, there will come a day when, with pride, you pick up your book again, a month after you last looked at it, flipping pages to admire your handiwork, and, landing on a RANDOM

page, the FIRST thing your eyes notice is. . . a STUPID TYPO!

WHAT! How is this possible? This thing has had more attention than King Tut's mummy! And yet there it is. You now look at another RANDOM page, and there is yet another error.



Such is the truth about writing. It will NEVER end. there will always be another mistake, whether an errant comma, a missing word, or an abruptly ending sentence. And

that is a fact of life. At some point you have to decide that enough is enough.

Nonetheless, your GOAL is to reduce, as best possible, these annoying distractions. And chances are that only YOU will find them—small solace, I know.

A friend of mine holds a contest, once his book is out. The person who finds the most mistakes wins a free, autographed, print copy.

Sounds like a deal to me.

FOUNTAIN PENS AND THE SPEED OF LIFE

Consider this: back in the time of fountain pens requiring ink wells—you know the ones you need to dip your nib in every few words, then blot afterwards to avoid ink smudges—writing was a different ballgame. Not unlike the changes in digital photography, where you snap a hundred photos to find the one good one because it is fast and disposable and . . . requires almost no thought, writing with a dip fountain pen meant that you had to THINK about what you wanted to write BEFORE you wrote it. Failure to do so often meant having to start over, no matter how far down the page you were; it was a point of pride that your page had almost no errors. One error was forgivable so long as it was crossed through with a single, thin line.

Now take that thought and amplify by two-hundred thousand words. The average novel, back then, was substantive, unlike the wide-spaced, fourth-grade vocabulary pieces that pass

as novels today. So thought and care were required, in addition to plotting, pacing, and tracking all aspects of the story.

Imagine Shakespeare, if you will, with quill and dipped ink, scribing one of his humungous

plays.

To write, or not to write; that is the question!

I use fountain pens when I write. I prefer them to ballpoint pens, and certainly over pencils. I have many fountain pens, each different weights, nib styles and thicknesses, and I find that, depending on my mood at the time, one particular fountain pen will be the instrument of choice at that time. Likewise, I have found the way the words emerge from the selected pen varies with mood as well.

Fountain pens are ele-

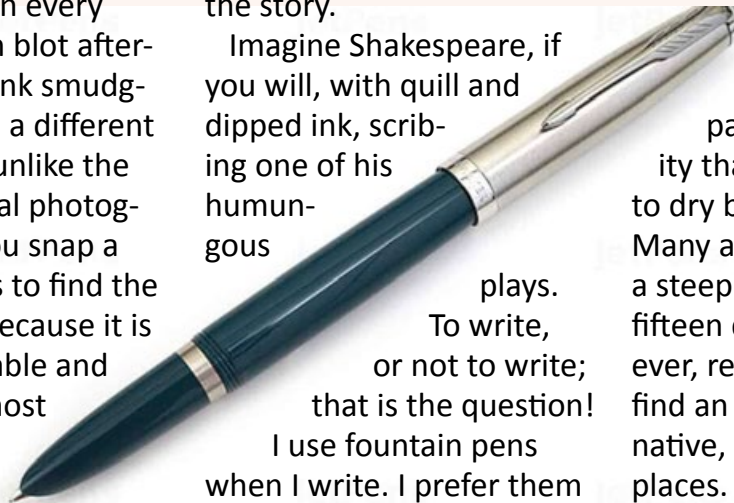
gant. Sadly, the notebooks of today are not elegant, often cheap paper that adsorbs the pen ink and causes chaos. I have to search for a decent notebook that has paper of enough quality that the ink had time to dry before absorption. Many are available, but at a steep price, some over fifteen dollars. I was, however, recently surprised to find an inexpensive alternative, at Walmart of all places. The brand is Exceed, and the paper is very good.

The second thing about fountain pens, regardless

dip or refillable, is that you have to LEARN to use them.

There

is a method to holding the pen, the angle of the nib, the way you apply pressure, and the effect you get as a result. It is an elegant instrument of a time long gone—sounds like Obi



Was talking about Lightsabers—and I wish it was still a skill that students would learn, if for no other reason than to learn patience and discipline.



I was at an antique store some time ago, and purchased a postcard that was written in 1900. It was not the card that attracted my in-

terest, but the handwriting on both sides. Stylish, uncommon, a skill someone had learned a very long time ago when the world was less hurried and less disposable. I attach it on page 36 for you to see.

If you are interested in trying a fountain pen, there are many that are excellent starter pens. You can even buy disposable—single use—fountain pens to see how you like it. If you do, and you are willing to persist, you can buy a reasonably-priced pen. Most have stainless steel nibs in the lower price range, harsher than the gold nibs of the more expensive pens, but still good to get a feel for the craft.

My grandfather owned a Parker 51 fountain pen. First introduced in 1941, the stylish and modern Parker 51 became an icon of mid-century design, and has been



sought after by fountain pen enthusiasts ever since.

Last year, Parker reintroduced a more economical version of this pen. Lighter plastic body, but same iconic style. I bought one even though I still have my grandfather's original pen. While his pen works, it is an old plunger refill system which, quite old and well used, doesn't hold the same quantity of ink.

The new version works well, takes cartridges or modern twist refill, and holds the ink well. I enjoy it. If you're interested in checking it out click [HERE](#) to learn more or buy it.

PS: I broke the rule about ALL CAPS!

GRAMMAR TIP FOR WRITERS

Do you say or write: "Me and Janice will do something."

Ugh!! Nails on chalkboards.

Remove the parts. Me will **not do something.**

I will do something. Janice and I will do something.

WRITER TIP

Don't Upset the Editor

It is not uncommon that newer writers are unaware of the way their manuscripts might read. Formatting is not a matter of just writing in Times New Roman, 12 point font, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins all around, although that *is* the correct way to format your manuscript.

Here are a few things you should not do.

- Do NOT use spaces to indent your paragraph.
- Do NOT use TABS to indent your paragraphs.

Both of these cause havoc when editors/publishers typeset manuscripts. It results in paragraph spacing going askew, and the resultant time spent by the typesetter deleting the tabs and spaces is not time well spent.

Instead, FORMAT your page using the settings feature of your word processor. You will find an option for Indent or First Line Indent. Set these to an appropriate number such as 0.125" and each new paragraph will be appropriately aligned and indented.

- Do NOT manually type your page headers at the top of each new page. This will result in the header being specific to your computer layout, but not to anyone else's, and may result in the headers appearing midway down the page of your editor's computer. Again, time spent correcting your mistakes in formatting are never appreciated.

Instead, add your PAGE HEADERS using the appropriate menu item for headers and footers. Every program has them. If you cannot find it, I suggest asking Google—they have answers for everything!

Thank you from your editor.



TALES FROM THE SCRIPT

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

Stuck on Second!

A common complaint among writers is “I’m stuck in the second act.” We all know that feeling when the initial exuberance has worn off, progress has slowed, and the way forward is no longer clear.

Often the trouble is not in the second act at all. Like a drip from the ceiling, the second act is where the problem is noticed, but not where it originates. When a writer is bogged down in the second act, it often means he or she has failed to do the necessary work in the first act.

In the first act, the writer must establish a main character with a goal that he or she will do anything to attain. Both the character and his or her goal must be clear to the audience. The character’s obsessive quest to achieve the goal is the power that drives the story. If the character is not sufficiently motivated by the importance of what he or she seeks, the story will falter

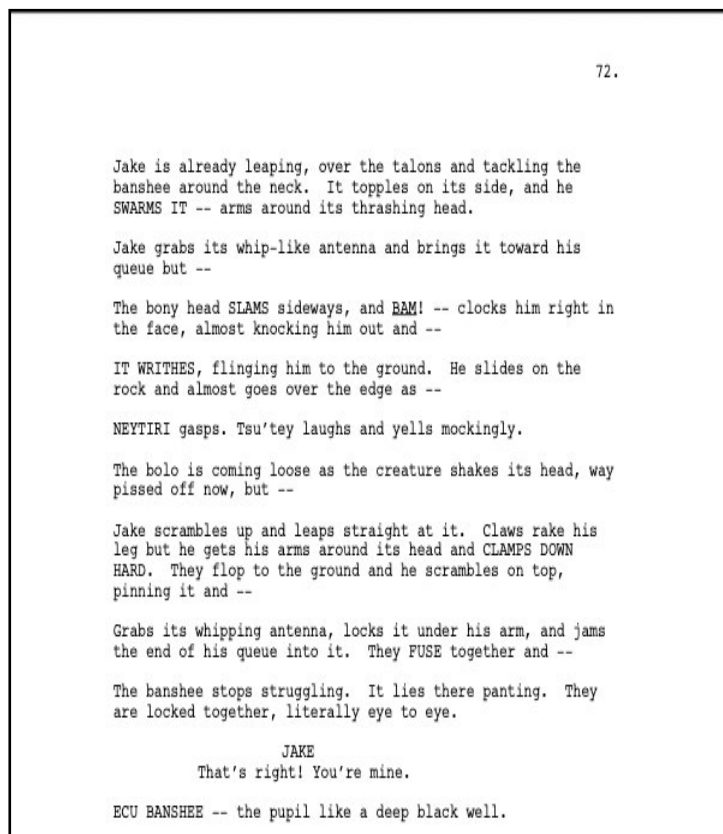
in the second act. Dorothy’s goal to return home from Oz is an example of a character with an important goal.

The goal need not be important to the audience as long as its importance to the

CHARACTER AND GOALS MUST BE POWERFUL.

character is clear. In a class for high school writers, one student pitched a story about three teenaged boys trying to obtain beer for a party. While most adults would not consider this a grand quest, it was clear in the story that nothing else mattered as much to the three characters as obtaining the beer. Their obsession with this goal drove this story to a hilarious conclusion.

The goal can be tangible (winning the game, rescuing the princess, discovering the lost ark) or intangible (earning respect, finding love, repaying a debt) or a combination of the two. Intangible goals are usually tied in with the character’s reasons for pursuing the goal. While



Production script from 'Avatar'.

few of us may ever confront an evil monster, we can all relate to a character who wants to do something to garner praise and admiration.

Character and goals must be powerful because in the second act the writer will place obstacles between the character and the goal. If the goal is not important enough to the character, or the character is not committed enough to attaining the goal, then the story won't have the energy to get through the second act. If Dorothy decided that the wicked witch was too powerful to confront, or that she liked Oz just as much as she liked Kansas, then there would be no reason to see the story to its familiar conclusion.

There are other ways to get bogged down in the second act, which we'll address at a later time. But if you're having trouble in the middle, go back and make sure you have a strong start. A character who will do anything to attain a goal is essential to keep a story moving and the audience involved.

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

SHORT STORY

OLD FRIENDS

by Joe Giordano

“Ricky, it’s Hart.”
I almost dropped the phone. “Hart Wardener? Holy shit.”

He’d dialed me from the gate call box. Former school chums, we went separate ways after graduation, and I lost contact. I hadn’t seen or spoken to Hart in thirty years.

“How the hell are you?” I asked.

“I’ve been better. Look, I’m at the Perla Street gate.”

I asked with both astonishment and a trace of suspicion. “How did you get my address?”

“On Facebook. I sent you repeated messages, but you never responded.”

“I stopped using Facebook years ago.”

“Your phone number wasn’t listed. Anyway, how do I get in?”

“I can open the gate from here.”

“Wait. I’m traveling in a pig of an RV. How far to walk to your house?”

“No way. I’ll pick you up.”

When someone you haven’t seen in years shows up

unexpectedly, you wonder what he wants. Admittedly, I’m not an easy guy to get hold of, but Hart had thirty years to make contact and didn’t. He wasn’t interested in keeping our friendship going, or maybe he just got caught up in his own life. That was my excuse for not reaching out to him. School days ended, and I unleashed my ambition on the world.

I jumped into my red Ferrari 488 and drove the mile and a half to the gate. The look on Hart’s face as I roared up to him was the effect I hoped for. The size of houses in my community were a hint, but the Ferrari added paragraphs about my success.

I jumped out and we embraced.

Hart hadn’t dressed to impress. He wore faded jeans and a scruffy T-shirt with a “Camper for Life” motto under the image of a pup tent. He had aged, but he

probably thought the same about me. His signature mustache needed trimming.

“Get in.”

He gawked. “Jesus, what a car. I’ve never been inside a Ferrari.”

Hart had the odor of someone living rough. He was a few years older than me, having been a corpsman in the army before attending graduate school. He wouldn’t talk about it, and I imagined he had some scarring experiences. A loner at school, he didn’t make many friends, but I gravitated toward outcasts.

I floored the gas and the Ferrari roared like a lion, no doubt pissing off my tight-ass neighbors who’d come to expect that from me.

“How fast is this thing?” he asked.

“On the track, over two-hundred-miles-per-hour, and I wasn’t pushing it.”

“Your insurance company permits you to race?” he asked in a surprised tone.

I smiled, perhaps a bit smugly. “I’m self-insured.”

We arrived at my estate. Twelve acres surrounded by six-foot-high stone walls. I clicked the actuator and opened the steel gate, then motored up to the porticoed entrance.

“Goddamn,” he said, “you live in a palace.”

Hart’s head was on a swivel as we walked into the vaulted entranceway where he stopped to admire the statuary and paintings.

He said, “I had no idea how well you fared after school.”

“I caught a few breaks,” I said in the most modest tone I could muster. When you make it big, the envy of others is the nectar you drink. However, Hart seemed genuinely enthusiastic about my success,

the sign of a real friend. If he’d come to me for help, I’d respond. Within reason, of course.

Hart sunk into the marshmallow brown leather couch in my great room, and I went into the kitchen and popped open a bottle of Crystal Champagne, returning with two flutes.

“Bubbly?” Hart asked accepting the glass.

“Something special for the occasion.

Salute.”

We clinked and sipped.

“Wow,” he said.

“If you’d rather have a Bordeaux, I’ve got a 1983 in my cellar that will spoil you for other wines.”

“Sounds wonderful, but I shouldn’t overdo the booze. I’ll need to drive.”

“Nonsense. You’re staying here tonight. Obviously, I have room.”

“That’s generous of you, but I don’t want to impose.”

“It’s fine. Look, you can’t just drop in after thirty years and run.”

Hart smiled. “I didn’t know how happy you’d be to see me. You’ve topped my expectations.”

“That’s my specialty,” I said, draining my glass. “Another?”

“Sure,” Hart said settling comfortably on the couch. “Why not?”

I retreated to the kitchen, returning with the bottle in an ice bucket. “I opened that Bordeaux to let it breathe. I gave my chef the day off, so I’ll grill us a couple of prime strips later, if that’s okay.”

“A personal chef? Oh my god.” He laughed. “Sure. Steaks would be fantastic. I’m definitely a meat and potatoes man.” Hart paused, looking around like he expected someone before he asked, “You live alone in this mansion? Never married?”

I let out a long breath. “Once. A few years after graduation. Lasted eighteen months. An expensive mistake I won’t repeat. Turns out that money is an aphrodisiac. I don’t lack for female company.”

“I bet,” Hart said with another chuckle.

“What about you?”

He sighed. “None of my relationships clicked. Now that I’m mostly on the road, the prospect for finding something lasting is small.”

“Yeah. I get that.”

Hart drank, and I refilled his glass. His cheeks had a flush that told me he was starting to feel the champagne.

He asked, “What the hell did you do to amass so much money? I knew you were the brainier guy at school, but the lifestyle you’ve created for yourself is incredible. I almost feel like I should call you Mister.”

I leaned back. “I was a financial advisor specializing in clients having multi-generational wealth.”

“Sounds opportunistic.”

“I suppose it was. Seven in ten families lose their money in the second generation, nine in ten in the third. I wouldn’t say this publicly, but a lot of third generation idiots whose inheritance stemmed from their grandparents’ success would’ve died in poverty if not for me.”

“You had to suffer some rich fools.”

I extended my arms to my surroundings. “For a good cause.”

We were silent for a moment. Having been honest with Hart, I decided to indulge a curiosity I’d had about him since school. “You were never forthcoming about your military experience.”

Hart grimaced and took another sip, seemingly thinking how he’d respond. “I entered the service with the naïve desire

to serve my country and ended up taking orders from assholes. After my discharge, I contemplated bombing recruiting stations, but decided to go back to school and try to become a boss rather than remain a grunt. I’m sorry to say that PTSD is real and has influenced my life.”

“Now, I understand why you shared my problem with authority.”

“Kissing ass was never my specialty.”

“What happened after school?”

“I had the knack for picking employers who eventually went bankrupt. I got downsized often. Not conducive to building a career.”

“How did you decide to come here?”

“A while back, I invested everything in the RV and headed across the country, stopping along the way in trailer camps. Having not seen you in thirty years, I became curious, so I detoured a bit to pay you a visit.” He raised his glass. “It’s great to see how lucky you’ve been.”

I stiffened and my tone sharpened. “Luck had nothing to do with it.”

“Oh. Come on. You skimmed off the top of a bunch of spoiled brats who were too rich and too stupid to know what you were doing.”

My face got hot, but I held my anger in check. Hart had proven to be like everybody else. He’d initially masked his envy, but the alcohol had dropped the veil. I wouldn’t allow him to misstate my accomplishments. “What do you know about hedges and straddles? Parking money in overseas tax havens? Trusts and estate planning?”

“I admit, my eyes glazed over during those classes in school.”

“Exactly, you pissed away your education whereas I used it as a foundation to build

extensive financial knowledge and a lucrative expertise.”

“Please. You were a hired gun. You sucked up to wealth and some of it stuck to you.”

I placed my glass on the cocktail table. “I always saw you as an angry guy.”

Hart shrugged and drained his glass, putting it next to mine. We locked eyes.

He said, “You were like a butler or a maid, just higher paid. Those wealthy people never had any regard for you. They used you and dismissed you the moment you were out of their sight.”

I stood. No longer able to control myself, and my voice rose. “You think you know me? You don’t know shit. I’ll show you what people thought of me. A gift one of my clients gave me in appreciation. That’ll shut your mouth.”

I stormed from the great room and went to my vault. In my agitated state, I flubbed the combination a couple of times until I took a deep breath, then opened the door and retrieved my evidence.

Returning to the great room, I shoved the finely finished wooden instrument into Hart’s face where he sat on the couch.

“Do you know what this is?” I asked in a snide tone, knowing that he didn’t.

He sounded deflated. “Tell me.”

My chest expanded. “This is a Stradivarius violin, one of the most expensive instruments in the world, valued at \$3.5 million.”

Hart reached out, but I tossed him two cotton gloves like the ones I’d donned.

“Put those on if you want to handle it.”

He complied before taking the violin from my hand.

“Exquisite,” he said.

I spoke in a purposely know-it-all tone. “This violin was made in 1727 by Antonio

Stradivari. One of my clients, Mrs. Moretti gifted me this piece as a token of her gratitude and regard.”

“Impressive.”

I continued. “Do you think she would give something so precious to her lap dog?”

Hart turned the violin over in his hands. “Certainly not.”

“So,” I said, puffing out a long breath, finally calm. “I won’t hear any more talk about butlers and maids. My clients valued me for the superstar I was.”

“Fair enough.”

I reached for Hart to return the instrument, but he laid it aside on the couch.

“If you don’t mind,” I said, “I keep the violin in an environmentally controlled vault. You’ve had your proof. Now, I need to put it back.”

“Nonsense,” Hart said matter-of-factly. “This is precisely why I came.”

My eyes narrowed, scanning his pockets for a weapon. “Do you think I’m going to allow you to walk out of here with my Stradivarius?” I braced, ready for a fight.

Hart stood and faced me, leaving the violin on the couch.

I balled my fists.

As he reached into his jeans pocket, I flinched, but he didn’t draw the blade I’d imagined, only a slim wallet.

He said, “This instrument was stolen in 2005 from the New York City apartment of 91-year-old Irene Moretti, a former concert violinist, while she was hospitalized and dying.”

I felt my face lose color. I gulped.

Hart continued. “We knew you embezzled and defrauded your clients, but you’d been clever and covered your tracks. We didn’t even have the evidence to justify a search warrant. But we also knew you

were light fingered and couldn't control yourself from snatching a few precious objects."

I sputtered. "Mrs. Moretti gave me the violin. You can't prove I stole it."

Hart opened the wallet to reveal FBI credentials. "Tell it to the jury. I bet when we search your house, we'll find a few missing items you won't be able to explain."

I thought to jump Hart and beat him unconscious, but toe to toe, I realized he was fitter than I'd imagined. Better to consult with the most expensive lawyer I could buy.

Hart produced handcuffs. "You're under arrest."

I allowed myself to be cuffed.

He said with a smile. "We're old friends, Ricky. You were a blowhard in school. I assured my team that your ego would trip you up now."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joe Giordano was born in Brooklyn. He and his wife Jane now live in Texas.

Joe's stories have appeared in more than one hundred magazines including The Saturday Evening Post, and

Shenandoah, and his short story collection, Stories and Places I Remember. His novels include, Birds of Passage, An Italian Immigrant Coming of Age Story, and the Anthony Provati thriller series, Appointment with ISIL, Drone Strike, and in June 2022, The Art of Revenge.

Visit Joe's website at

<https://joe-giordano.com/>

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This is Joe's second story published with Books & Pieces Magazine.]

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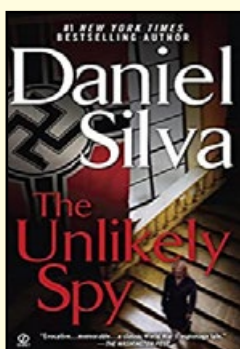
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By a USA Today bestselling author:

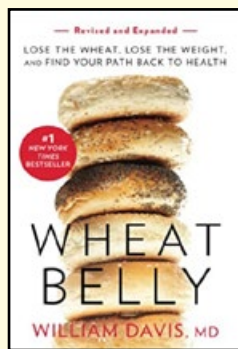
Michael, a professor of particle physics, has discovered a way to pierce the veil of time and space, but in so doing, he's unwittingly opened Pandora's box. Is it possible to undo what a future version of yourself has done, or is the world doomed to the chaos that's been loosed on the world?

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For Britain's counterintelligence operations, this meant finding the unlikely agent imaginable—a history professor named Alfred Vicary, handpicked by Churchill himself to expose a highly dangerous, but unknown, traitor. The Nazis, however, have also chosen an unlikely agent. Catherine Blake is the beautiful widow of a war hero, a hospital volunteer—and a Nazi spy under direct orders from Hitler: uncover the Allied plans for D-Day..

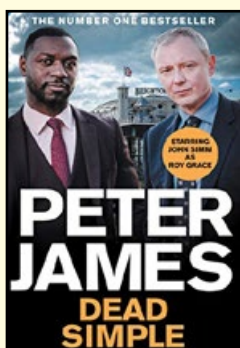
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Wheat Belly introduced the world to the hidden dangers of modern wheat and gluten, revolutionizing the conversation around health and weight loss forever. Nearly a decade later, Dr. William Davis's provocative indictment of the dominant staple in our diet continues to inspire countless people to "lose the wheat."

After witnessing thousands of patients regain their health after giving up wheat, Davis reached the disturbing conclusion that wheat is the single largest contributor to the nationwide obesity epidemic.

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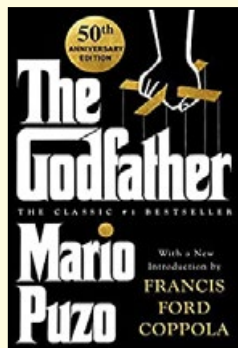


Now a major ITV series, *Grace*, adapted for television by screenwriter Russell Lewis and starring John Simm.

It was meant to be a harmless stag-night prank. But a few hours later, the groom has disappeared and his friends are dead.

With only three days to the wedding, Roy Grace is contacted by the man's distraught fiancée to unearth what happened on that fateful night.

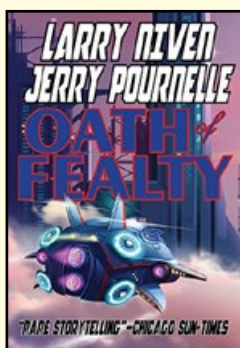
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With its brilliant and brutal portrayal of the Corleone family, *The Godfather* burned its way into our national consciousness. This unforgettable saga of crime and corruption, passion and loyalty continues to stand the test of time, as the definitive novel of the Mafia underworld.

This #1 New York Times bestseller in 1969, Mario Puzo's epic was turned into the incomparable film of the same name, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

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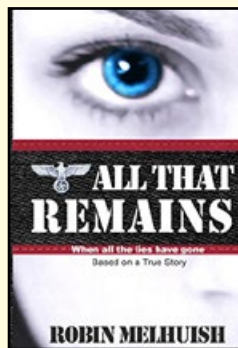


In a dystopian future, where pollution and violence overrun Los Angeles streets, a Utopia flourishes. Todos Santos is thousand-foot-high arcology; a single-structured city that rises above the festering skyscrapers to offer its privileged residents the perfect blend of technology and security in exchange for their oath of allegiance and vigilance.

But is this orderly city elevating humanity, or shackling it? There are those who feel the constant video surveillance oppressive, rather than inclusive.

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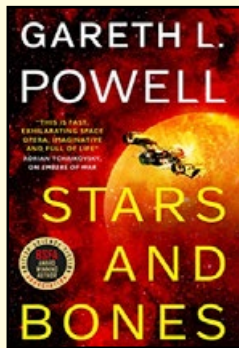
ALL THAT REMAINS
 by Robin Melhuish

A tale of circumstance, a chance find in a junk shop and an old war vet's tale that leads to the love of Alastair's life and uncovers a trail of lies and deceit that goes back decades. The devious connivance of the unscrupulous, on all sides, in WWII to defraud their nations of millions before the war ends. The story of babies bred for the Third Reich and the mothers that gave their bodies, some more freely than others. Then love gets in the way, the rest is history.

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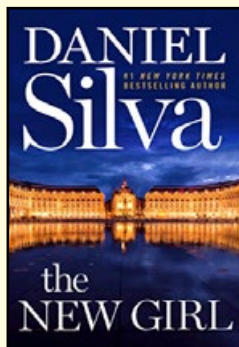
When her sister disappears while responding to a mysterious alien distress call, Eryn insists on being part of the crew sent to look for her, tasked with seeking out a legendary recluse who may just hold the key to humanity's survival.

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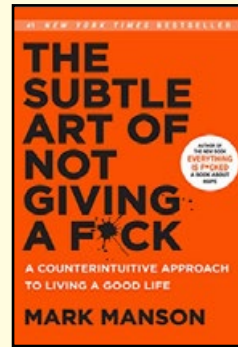
In this Hugo Award-winning alternative history classic—the basis for the Amazon Original series—the United States lost World War II and was subsequently divided between the Germans in the East and the Japanese in the West. It's America in 1962. Slavery is legal once again. And it seems as though the answers might lie with Hawthorne Abendsen, a mysterious and reclusive author, whose best-selling novel describes a world in which the US won the War. Philip K. Dick at his best.

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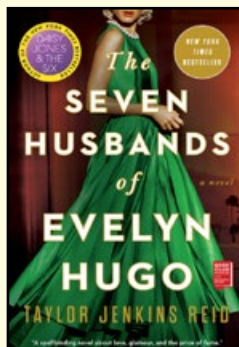
At an exclusive private school in Switzerland, mystery surrounds the identity of the beautiful raven-haired girl who arrives each morning in a motorcade fit for a head of state. Her father is Khalid bin Mohammed, a much-maligned crown prince of Saudi Arabia. He is now reviled for his role in the murder of a dissident journalist. And when his only child is brutally kidnapped, he turns to the one man he can trust to find her before it is too late. Gabriel Allon.

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For decades, we've been told that positive thinking is the key to a happy, rich life. "F**k positivity," Mark Manson says. "Let's be honest, shit is F**ked and we have to live with it." In his wildly popular Internet blog, Manson doesn't sugarcoat or equivocate. He tells it like it is—a dose of raw, refreshing, honest truth that is sorely lacking today. The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F**k is his antidote to the coddling, let's-all-feel-good mindset that has infected American society and spoiled a generation, rewarding them with gold medals just for showing up.

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Aging and reclusive Hollywood movie icon Evelyn Hugo is finally ready to tell the truth about her glamorous and scandalous life. But when she chooses unknown magazine reporter Monique Grant for the job, no one is more astounded than Monique herself. Why her? Why now?

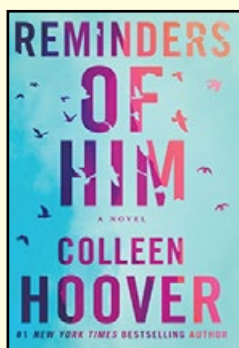
Regardless of why Evelyn has selected her to write her biography, Monique is determined to use this opportunity to jumpstart her career.

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Ryland Grace is the sole survivor on a desperate, last-chance mission. Except that right now, he doesn't know that. He can't even remember his own name, let alone the nature of his assignment or how to complete it. And he's just been awakened to find himself millions of miles from home, with nothing but two corpses for company. It's up to him to puzzle out an impossible scientific mystery—and conquer an extinction-level threat to our species.

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After serving five years in prison for a tragic mistake, Kenna Rowan returns to the town where it all went wrong, hoping to reunite with her four-year-old daughter. But the bridges Kenna burned are proving impossible to rebuild. Everyone in her daughter's life is determined to shut Kenna out, no matter how hard she works to prove herself.

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

'Angle of Death' (AltPublish, 2021, 192 pages, \$6.99) by William Gensburger is the second novel in the 'Mackenzie (Maxie) Michaels Mystery' series. In 'Angle of Death,' celebrity detective Maxie leaves Texas to investigate the kidnapping of 28-year-old Jennifer Marcel. Her return to Hollywood includes the unfortunate situation where she must stay in the home of actor Brad Paschal, her ex-husband and Marcel's boyfriend. Meanwhile, an even bigger threat to Maxie arises after the terrorist Maxie apprehended in Book 1, Ahmad Hassan, escapes law enforcement during his transport to a different prison. While both storylines figure prominently in the book, the primary focus in Book 2 is the kidnapping case.

Three familiar characters from Book 1 accompany Maxie to California to solve the case: Devin Parker, an investigative reporter and Maxie's love interest, Kobe Jameson, Maxie's partner, and Tyson, an at-risk teen who Jameson mentors. The complex web of Maxie's relationships adds depth to the story. Her deepening fondness for Devin, and respect for fellow detective, Kobe Jameson, provides a stark contrast to her attitude toward Brad, who clings to the idea that he might rekindle a romance with Maxie, despite her clear dislike for him. Gensburger also explores the darkest recesses of humanity through the nefarious actions of Hassan and his followers. This is offset by young Tyson's delight in Paschal's mansion, which provides levity and humor to the storyline.

Reminiscent of Michael Connelly's depiction of Los Angeles, Gensburger infuses the pages of 'Angle of Death' with the glamorous life of the uber-rich, and the not-so-glamorous reality of the smoggy air of the "City of Angels." Maxie's opinion of Hollywood is that every-

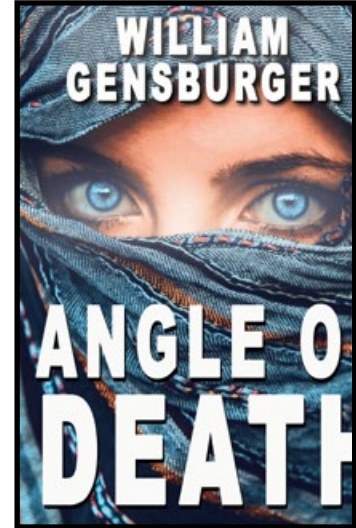
'Angle of Death' by William Gensburger

thing looks pretty, but there's a lot of emptiness hidden within. She could have very well said the same thing about her ex-husband.

Throughout the tale, Maxie's reputation as a kick-ass detective is solidified as she investigates Jennifer's disappearance. The lack of a ransom request, coupled with Pascal's descent into alcoholism, casts suspicion as to the actor's role in his girlfriend's disappearance. But delightful plot twists abound that keep readers guessing. 'Angle of Death's' fast pace makes it a perfect summer read.

Jennifer Marcel's kidnapping case is solved in Book 2 and the groundwork is laid for the last novel in the series where Maxie, Devin, and Kobe will face a nuclear threat masterminded by Hassan. In Book 3, Maxie will have to thwart the one called 'The Extremist' as he sets out to destroy all of Los Angeles.

William Gensburger is the author of 'Texas Dead,' the award-winning first novel in the Mackenzie Michaels trilogy, 'Distant Rumors,' an anthology of 16 stories about life and death, and 'Homo Idiotus,' a collection of published newspaper editorials. He's the former publisher of *The Concordian*, a monthly community newspaper, a proficient graphic designer, and photographer. He's currently working on the third and final novel in the Mackenzie Michaels series 'The Extremist.' To learn more, visit <http://www.misterwriter.com>.



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EXCERPT: *DAUGHTER OF HADES* by Mack Little

Chapter 1 *Leaving St. Dismas*



St. Dismas Plantation, Barbados

19th May 1649

Geraldine felt dirty. The filth and shame slithered from her body and slicked the friction of her thighs as she stumbled out the doors and down the stairs leading to the front lawn of the great house. The angry bellows of Owen Craig erupted from the looming white walls of the grand Jacobean mansion. She looked over her shoulder, toward the pale manor cloaked in the shadows of mahogany trees. Howls of rage flew from the darkened arches. She feared the screams might incarnate at any moment into the human form of retribution. Never mind the vile assault she had endured, at her master's hand—she could be boiled alive for defending herself.

"I should have killed him," she whispered to herself, over and over, as her feet gathered speed.

She left the path of the carriageway and darted to that place in the stone wall where well-worn gouges hidden by the creeping clematis served as footholds. She climbed it easily, then ran along the path leading away from the grand house. The raging howls of her attacker receded, leaving in its wake a quiet gloom suffused by the winds that whispered through the sugarcane. She listened for the overseer and his men. Had they been set after her yet?

The road before her forked. The path to freedom led south to the sea where a ship waited for her. The other road curved northward toward the slave quarters where her ma and da lived. For the first time in her life, she wanted to find shelter in those rubble houses formed from found coral and thatched roofs. The desire to go to her ma muddled her resolve to run away as she came to the crossroads. She only needed to continue forward along the path to the slave houses to find comfort in Saoirse's arms. She would soothe her daughter's hurts and smooth her shredded dignity. She would fix the tatters with a sweet stickum of blandishments formed from love and esteem—mostly love. Her ma could put her back together.

She imagined her mother must already be dressed in her shift, with her ash-blond locks straying from her nightcap, about to settle on the sleeping pad next to Da. *Daddy*. He could never know what Craig had done to her. He would have to avenge his daughter and kill the slave master. A black man who killed his owner would meet swift and gruesome punishment.

A sob escaped the young girl. She would have to heal herself. And quickly.

Geraldine took the road south.

The smell of cherry blossoms left a hint of fragrance upon the air, but she found the sweetness overbearing. Geraldine ran beneath the dark and twisting branches covered in leafy stalks and furled blooms. She used to love the delicate bouquet on Cherry Tree Hill. But tonight, the smell suffocated her. It preyed upon her like some restorative released into the darkness. It roused agonizing visions and summoned them forth in shadows.

The memory of bony fingers digging into the flesh of her arms, like talons, stopped her in her tracks. She had struggled. Craig held onto her, still believing he could cajole Geraldine into acquiescence. They stumbled and upset the bar. A decanter filled with rum hit the floor with such force the stopper fell out. Spirits spilled and soaked the rug. How could he overpower her? Craig was a skinny thing compared to Geraldine's tall and robust frame. Yet he wrestled her to the floor. Her head landed in the rum-soaked carpet. The sticky sweet smell of it filled her nose. It choked her as she gulped

air to scream. The flat of his hand crashed against her cheek, the impact making blue sparks appear and throb in opaque amoebic globs before her eyes. Geraldine kicked and flailed. Still, he managed to trap her lips with his wet mouth. His tongue, thick and slimy, filled her mouth. She pried his face away from hers as his hand groped at her skirt. He pulled it over her waist. Geraldine slapped him.

“Ye bitch!” Craig gasped, and punched her in the side.

It knocked the wind from her. She could not draw a breath. It was as if she were suffocating as he kneed her legs apart. When she felt her undergarment tear, she tried to roll to her side, still struggling to breathe, but he pinned her. She clawed at his arms and spat in his face. She tried to close her legs, to wriggle out of his grasp, when his knee crashed into her privates. Geraldine’s agony spread up toward her stomach, wrapped around her, and squeezed her kidneys. She groaned and writhed in pain. Then Craig thrust himself inside her.

The memory of it overcame her as she stood upon the dirt path. She fell to her knees. Silent sobs wracked her body. Her father had told her this would happen. Geraldine, though, discomfited by Craig’s attention, had never guessed the disgusting and humiliating fate that threatened her. She had believed her father overwrought and distrusting when he sent the letters to his buccaneer friend, asking him to remove her with such haste. But Da knew. Her father knew. *How could I have been so stupid?* She fell to her bottom and sat in the middle of the road.

Out of the darkness, a pair of hands grabbed her. Geraldine opened her mouth to scream, and a broad palm with long fingers clamped themselves over her lips to stifle the cry. Black eyes glared at her from folded lids. Sheets of long black hair framed the angles of the cheeks and strong jawline of the stranger whose skin took on an auric cast in the moon’s light. Geraldine was determined not to be overpowered again. This time she would kill or be killed.

Want to read more? Buy the book [HERE](#).

Our thank to Mack Little for permission to print this excerpt.

SHORT STORY

The Worry Monsters of Ocean City

by Bryan Schwartzman

Hannah briefly covered her ears as her husband, Eric, sang—screamed really, along with the radio, using the steering wheel as a snare drum.

Pour some sugar on me in the name of love. I'm hot. Sticky sweet. From my he-he-head to my feet. Yeah. His sometimes-goofy nature and unabashed love of 80s hair metal were two reasons she fell for him long ago, in the time before parenthood. Now, as they inched south along Route 113 — which cut through Delaware's farm country — she found it beyond annoying.

"Maybe knock it off for a bit?" said Hannah.

"What? Knock what off?" said Eric.

"Pretending you're Joe Elliott from Def Leppard. Totally inappropriate lyrics."

"Makes this traffic go faster. And Livi doesn't mind, do you?"

"Whatever," an 8-year-old voice answered from the back seat. "Maybe this is like, a little less boring with dad singing."

"You see, she likes it." Eric sang his answer, imitating a screeching guitar.

Not three hours into their trip and she was already outvoted and ready to open the passenger door and fling herself onto the road. She wished the car could somehow turn itself into a tank and flatten all the other vehicles clogging the route to the beach town. Livi's child psychologist had warned Hannah that they were going on a family trip, not a vacation. Be prepared for

parenting in overdrive, said Doctor Abby, as Livi called her. The problem was, Hannah really needed an actual vacation after spending nearly every day of the summer with Livi while Eric coached basketball camp. And, teachers — both she and her husband — had to report back the following week and she'd restart the relentless pace of the school year: five classes a day, lesson plans, labs, tests, grades, faculty in-service. Soon she'd be trying to explain the difference between ionic and covalent bonds to hormonal teenagers with attention spans that rivaled those of small invertebrates. Her reserves would run especially low come October when high school basketball season got underway, and Eric would frequently return home after Livi had gone to bed and, when he was present, his mind remained fixated on Xs and Os. This was her last week before stepping back on the treadmill, and she was stuck in traffic on the way to Ocean City, Maryland, where Eric had wanted to go.

The radio DJ introduced the next song by another 80s band called Great White.

"Great White! Mom, are there sharks in the Ocean?" asked Livi.

"That's a worry question," answered Hannah. "We already talked about sharks. You're not asking for information, just

expressing worry. I don't want to feed the worry monster."

Livi lowered her head dejectedly. "Clouds in the sky, is it gonna rain? What floor are we staying on? Is there an elevator?"

"Worry questions, sweetie. You know there's an elevator," Hannah replied. Eric was seemingly absorbed in the task of driving 15 mph and consuming music.

"I won't ride an elevator. I won't, won't, won't."

When they finally arrived at the condo building on the edge of the Isle of Wight Bay, Hannah staggered out of the SUV like a long-trapped spelunker who'd finally seen daylight. She felt soothed by the warm sun on her bare arms and the scent of seawater. Then she thought of the stuffed trunk; so much crap to spend four days in a tourist trap.

"Sooo long and sooo boring," said Livi, somehow making her voice heard above the shrieking children in the pool sandwiched between the parking lot and the bay. "Can I go swim now?"

"Livi, we've got to unload all this stuff," Hannah said, breathless, as she heaved a large suitcase.

"Boring," Livi said flatly as her duffel bag—decorated with Frozen, Hello Kitty, and Taylor Swift stickers—across the lot.

The building's open-air vestibule offered respite from the August sun and presented two options to reach the sixth floor: elevator or stairs. It had been relatively easy to skip elevators in their suburban Philadelphia lives. No avoiding it here, Hannah thought, not when they'd have to hike up and down six flights every time they came and went. And the therapist had said repeatedly that avoidance only feeds

anxiety's appetite. Here, she thought, was a perfect opportunity for Livi to face her fears, to practice what they paid \$165 an hour to learn.

"I am not getting into that elevator," Livi declared.

"Olivia Amber, let's go through this. Tell me the best thing that could happen, the worst thing that could happen, and the most likely," said Hannah.

"I'm going to die on that elevator."

Where was Eric at the precise moment that she needed backup? His left knee usually tightened on long rides, resulting from a fifteen-year-old college basketball injury, re-aggravated multiple times. Totally legitimate, Hannah knew. Still, whenever coaching his boys, he managed to move serviceably across the hardwood, especially

when berating a ref over a perceived injustice. Yet now, he'd been woefully out of position. Suitcase in two, he belatedly arrived at the standoff.

"What's going on here?" said Eric.

"Mommy wants me to die in that elevator," Livi said clinically.

"Let's try a visualization," Eric said.

Hannah seethed inside. Here, she'd been working on something they'd practiced with the therapist, and Eric rides in, immediately going to his visualization techniques — which came from his basketball life, not psychology — without even asking what Hannah had tried.

Eric had told Livi repeatedly that "if we imagine ourselves doing something enough times, if we come up with a mental roadmap for how we will react when the time comes, we'll be able to do it, you'll be able to do it. I want you to trust me and

"I'm going to die on that elevator."

close your eyes.”

Amazingly, it had worked the first time, when he'd managed to get Livi to use a public toilet with an automatic flusher when nothing else they'd get her to relax and release. Since then, not so much, and Dr. Abby had suggested it was time to try some new techniques. Once upon a time, Eric's visualization techniques had helped Hannah. On their first anniversary, they'd visited Knysna in South Africa's Western Cape Province, some 200 miles from where the Atlantic and Indian

Before taking in the vista, Hannah took note of the four-story drop to the parking lot.

Oceans meet. Last stop in the terrestrial world before Antarctica. Clearwater. Stark sandstone cliffs. Rowing to an island off the coast, staring up at a slab of the cliff which dwarfed the human body. All she could imagine was freefalling off the cliff before throttling into the ground. Still, almost like a shaman, he'd managed to help her envision rappelling down the cliff, trusting her life to a rope and the wisdom of guides who looked like stoned camp counselors. And they'd done it, and she'd looked on the white beach, out into the waters, feeling the wind on her face sweeping off the great ocean. The memory made her wish to be someplace like that now, somewhere she'd remember the rest of her life.

“Daddy, I just see the elevator falling.”

He closed his eyes and sighed.

“OK, you can climb the stairs this time; you promise to ride the elevator down,” he said.

Hannah's pulse accelerated; muscles tensed.

“Done,” Live said.

Despite the weight of her suitcase, Livi grabbed it and began sprinting up the stairs.

“Way to undermine me,” Hannah said. “Why not just tell her to ignore everything I say?”

“Figured you'd already tried something, and it hadn't worked. Time to try something else,” he said.

“This isn't a basketball game. We're not trying to solve a zone defense,” she said, trying to speak coach language.

“Why not let her get comfortable here, build up some confidence, then tackle the elevator?” he said.

“That's not how it works,” Hannah proclaimed, waving her arms as if arguing a ref's call.

The elevator arrived, and the two squeezed in, uncomfortably close, her eyes inches from his chest. Hannah awaited a response. None came. The elevator stopped, the doors slowly opened, and the midday light flooded in. Before taking in the vista, Hannah took note of the four-story drop to the parking lot. How many mothers had been tempted to take the plunge on family trips?

Seagulls cried above, and bay waves collided with the embankment below. From this perspective, she saw Ocean City as a narrow strip of land, a once-pristine barrier island overcrowded with human settle-

ment. The architecturally anemic hotels and apartment complexes radiated a harsh light. On the water, sparkles of sunlight were shimmering on the emerald waves.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Eric said. “The ocean on one side, the bay on the other. Doesn’t it make you just want to jump in?”

Yes, she took some pleasure in seeing so much water, but she wasn’t in a mood to give too much ground.

“You know I’m not a beach person,” she said. “I have to admit I could get used to looking out at the water every day.”

In selling her on Ocean City, Eric recalled the deep-memory-forming, annual visits with his Irish-Catholic family. And he’d leaned on the fact that just to the south of the resort town was Assateague Island, a narrow thirty-seven-mile stretch of sand, wind, and beach best known for herds of

wild ponies. He acknowledged there might also be giant, blood-sucking mosquitos.

Before they’d booked the Airbnb, he mentioned the elephant, which only reminded Hannah how much she wanted to go back to South Africa, or some far-flung destination. Even if they could afford it now, how could they fly into the unknown with a child afraid of everything? From the safety of an open-top vehicle in a national wildlife reserve, they’d encountered an adult male elephant dislodging a small tree from the soil and waving it in the air like a conquering warrior. The elephant had the power to overturn their vehicle, yet it was just showing off either for them or other members of his herd, who stood and watched. As a girl, she’d seen elephants in the zoo, sad, listless creatures. But this, she was sure, was the first time she’d really seen an elephant, a powerful, majestic

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individual imbued with its full spirit. For an instant, she seemed to lock eyes with the elephant and was sure she'd experienced a fleeting revelation. Something about the interrelatedness or connection between all beings. It wasn't something she could describe or a feeling that had ever been replicated.

Livi emerged from the staircase, panting, placing her suitcase down, and rolling it.

"Check out our new backyard, Liv," Eric said.

Grabbing hold of the railing, Livi gazed southward and immediately fixated on a point about 20 blocks south, a cluster of waterslides rising high above the ground.

"That looks amazing," Livi said, to Hannah's amazement.

Her daughter had just refused to step on an elevator, and she was thinking of careening down a slide. Whether Livi would go through with it at the top of one of those slides was another matter. If Hannah had learned one thing, it was that anxiety played havoc with the human mind in strange ways.

"Liv, I'll totally do the big slide with you," he said.

Hannah whispered the door code to Livi, and she punched in the keypad, opening the rental condo. Hannah's eyes were immediately drawn to the floor-to-ceiling windows, revealing an inviting balcony and stunning bay view. Jet skis bobbed in the distance, and parasailors flew in wild patterns like insects. Hannah thought that maybe, just maybe, she could give her brain a vacation from the constant flash of thoughts and worries, from a life lived on high alert.

She threw down her suitcase in the living room, opened the door to the balcony,

and stepped outside, feeling the summer breeze against her face. Her husband and child followed. Seagulls circled overhead.

"Mommy, can I feed the birds?" Livi said.

"Not unless you want them pooping all over us," Eric said as he tried to straighten his knee, wincing in pain.

"I'll just talk to them," she said. "Scraw. Scraw. Scraw."

"That's not annoying," Hannah said. "Not annoying at all."

Once they'd brought everything up from the car, they had a lunch of tuna salad sandwiches, chips, and apples. They munched without conversation or music: the kind of silence that reveals the surprising loudness of mouths chewing on food. Soon, Livi began lobbying hard to hit the condo pool. Hannah suggested they check out the boardwalk. Eric brokered a compromise, pool for 45 minutes, and then they'd see some of the sights. Since no one was eager to get back in a car, Hannah suggested they ride the bus south, down to where the boardwalk began. As the bus approached, Livi had a minor panic attack; Eric led her in some mindful breathing and managed to get her to step on the bus when it stopped on Ocean City's main boulevard. Hannah berated herself. Livi hadn't ridden a bus since they'd left Philly for the suburbs. Why hadn't she realized it would freak her daughter out? Why hadn't she formed a plan with Livi as they were getting ready, applying globs of sunblock? Yes, she had to admit, sometimes Eric's methods worked.

Though neither said so to Hannah, it seemed that her husband and daughter enjoyed wandering the boardwalk, navigating between throngs of people, catching the aromas of fried dough, cotton

candy, taffel, barbeque, overcooked pizza, and sweaty humans. They'd watched the slow turning of the Ferris wheel, though Livi wouldn't even consider a ride, as if her parents had just suggested she run through a minefield. Removing shoes, they walked on the sand, Livi climbing on a dinosaur sculpture before wading unafraid into the water and getting doused by a wave. Eric needed to run to the boardwalk to buy an expensive, poorly-made towel.

They'd gotten so much fresh air and exercise that Hannah was hopeful all three would crash early that night. Despite being in a new environment, which usually kept her up late, Livi shockingly nodded off as soon as she got into bed. Eric wasn't too far behind. Not Hannah. Between her mind and the seagulls, sleep seemed like an impossible dream.

Scraw. Scraw. Scraw.

The clock read 12:46 a.m.

In addition to the seagulls, Hannah could hear the waves crashing into breakers six stories below. Eric slept soundly curled beside her, diagonally, his long arms and legs commandeering valuable mattress real estate. Hannah couldn't stop replaying the events of the day, hearing Livi's questions in the car, in refusing to get on the elevator, and needing to be talked to on the bus. On a normal day, she'd get a few of what Dr. Abby called worry questions. Today, they'd felt non-stop, as if the worry monster had gorged on a five-course meal. "What if we miss the bus? What if the next one doesn't stop? What if it starts moving before I sit? What if there's an accident?"

Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, Hannah couldn't help but think that, in asking worry questions over and over again, Livi was expressing an essential truth: terrible

things can happen anywhere, anytime. The biggest difference between Hannah and Livi was that Hannah could visualize far more catastrophic scenarios. What if a crazed gunman shot up the boardwalk? What if a terrorist got hold of a cluster bomb and targeted the Mid-Atlantic region? What if the electrical grid went down? What if climate change or the extinction of a key species made the planet uninhabitable in Livi's lifetime?

Between all the sessions with Dr. Abby and the extra reading she'd done—books that, once finished, would sit on Eric's nightstand for months, untouched—she'd learned a couple of contradictory things about anxiety.

- Science doesn't have good explanations for what causes an anxious brain.
- Genetics has something to do with it.
- For too long, parents, especially mothers, have been blamed, maligned even, for all the neurosis expressed by their children.

Yet no matter how many times Dr. Abby had told her not to blame herself, how could she not? Hadn't she passed her anxiety onto her daughter by example or through her essential nature? Hadn't Eric helped her move past every little fear standing in her way only to see fear returning with more fuel than ever after she gave birth to another human being?

"Dadddeeee."

Had Hannah drifted to sleep? She heard a scream but processed it slowly, partly because it wasn't directed at her.

She elbowed Eric. Called his name. She needed sleep. Needed to pass responsibility to him. But he didn't stir. She got out of bed and stumbled toward Livi's room,

her eyes readjusting to the darkness of an unfamiliar room.

Livi sat up in bed, moaning unintelligibly, somewhere between asleep and awake.

“I don’t understand you, honey,” said Hannah.

“The waves,” Livi said, sounding more conscious. “They’re so close.”

“Not gonna hurt you, honey. We’re safe in this building.”

Hannah lay in bed beside her daughter. Livi draped an arm across Hannah’s chest. After a few minutes, Hannah heard Livi’s rhythmic breathing. Yet Livi stirred often, delivering a kick to Hannah every so often. Hannah was unable to sleep for hours, staring at the ceiling, neurons firing.

When she opened her eyes at 8:03 a.m., she knew the day would be hard.

She felt slightly drugged as she got out of bed. The kitchen was right next to Livi’s room. Eggs crackled on the stove. Eric whistled while he maneuvered the spatula. Livi lay stomach down on the hardwood, her hands propping up her head, eyes entranced by some cartoon. The previous day’s brilliant light was replaced by an uninspiring gray that dulled the water, reducing the surface to a foreboding murkiness.

“Morning,” Eric said. “Guess you needed your sleep.”

Hannah felt pure indignation.

“She called for you. She called ‘daddy.’ You didn’t hear it. Didn’t want to hear.”

“Whoa. Let’s calm down,” he said, turning off the burner and taking a step toward his wife. You are the MVP of the household, no question.”

Livi materialized between them, making her case for the waterpark. Eric suggested the beach. Maybe it was the horrid

night of sleep. Maybe it was the seagulls screeching, logged inside her brain even when they were quiet. Whatever the cause, she was gripped by a compulsion to do what she wanted. Her brain was too foggy, her patience too thin, to suggest any compromise.

“You know what I like? I like nature. My radical idea is that we go to Assateague Island today and do the waterpark tomorrow. If it rains, we can hop back in the car, get ice cream, and find a movie theater or a bowling alley. That doesn’t ruin anyone’s vacation, does it?”

Commanding the wheel, Hannah drove along the island’s lone road. No one spoke, as if the family was headed for a long-dreaded obligation, like scattering a hated aunt’s ashes. On both sides, batches of heather and myrtle crept above the dunes.

“Livi, keep an eye out for the ponies.”

“I don’t care about stupid ponies.”

Hannah noticed a sign for a trailhead and thought that a stroll would be good for all of them. She grabbed one of the last spots on the pine-edged parking lot. Turning the car off and stepping outside, she felt her breathing and heart rate slow, the trees and air having an immediate effect. The prospect of seeing wild ponies excited her like a little girl. She only hoped that, if they saw one, her little girl would come around. Hannah and Livi trudged toward the trailhead. Eric lumbered behind.

“Your knee?” Hannah called to him.

“Can’t seem to get it straight,” he said.

Taking the lead, Livi bounded in front of them. They walked on a path surrounded by short trees, the sounds of the marshes everywhere, birds and bubbling wa-

ter, and croaking frogs. Their immersion in the woods lasted only a few minutes. The pines became sparser, then gave way to uncovered marsh. Hannah noticed a boardwalk jutting out into the water, raised by stilts above the mud and short grass. Livi had already made it 100 yards out on the boardwalk, disappearing into a batch of about a dozen people who had jammed the pathway.

Hannah slowed her stride so Eric could catch up. Together, the two reached the boardwalk, their feet striking the wood beams simultaneously. A row of three wooden beams served as a vertical barrier, preventing people from taking a fall. As they got closer to Livi, Hannah got her first glimpse of an Assateague Pony. A herd. A family. The creatures stood in pools of muddy water eating grass, swatting flies with their tails, looking utterly unperturbed. Hannah imagined a sense of bemusement from the animals as if they couldn't understand why these two-legged creatures would spend their time standing and watching them. She had read that, according to legend, the horses' ancestors had survived a shipwreck off the Virginia coast, swimming to the island and discovering a life of freedom — and giant mosquitoes.

A small hand grabbed hers, calling Hannah by her three-letter-name.

"Mom, mom. This is so cool. They're so close. What do you think they're thinking about?"

"I don't know, sweetie. I don't know," Hannah said. She couldn't help but laugh, a sound that disappeared into the air.

A foal took tentative steps toward the raised boardwalk, briefly looking up at his admirers. Livi struggled to get around

people and have a clear look at the pony. Livi placed one foot on the lowest barrier beam, then the other. Soon, she'd climbed to the middle beam so that her hands rested on the top and her torso bent awkwardly over the top.

"Livi, I think you should get down," said Eric.

"She's Okay. This is the happiest I've seen her all summer," said Hannah.

"What should I name you?" Livi asked. "Luna, that's a good name for a horse."

"Ma'am, excuse me," a voice called out. "You look all peaceful, and I hate to interrupt. I think you should have your daughter get down. Even if she can't read the no climbing signs, I imagine you can."

Hannah resented the intrusion by a woman in her 50s with a raspy, smoker's voice. Nothing worse than being told by a stranger you're a terrible parent, she thought. Both mother and daughter had managed to quiet their anxious imaginations, fully immersed in what was in front of them. The best thing Hannah could do for her daughter, she thought, was let her be, let her experience a moment without restraint. Livi looked secure. Hannah thought, what could happen? If mother and daughter couldn't sometimes let down their guard, they'd be consumed by worry.

"Hannah, she's right. Livi, get down now," said Eric.

Of all of Eric's possible betrayals, Hannah thought, siding with this stranger was the most egregious.

First came the soundwaves: a sneaker slipping on wood, a girl grunting then emitting a scream that dwarfed all previous howls. Then came the light waves. Livi teetered, tried to regain her balance, then fell out of sight toward a swampy abyss. Han-

nah's mind initially refused to follow, as if she'd reached the edge of the flat world and Livy had careened beyond, descending to irrecoverable depths.

Livi had been on the fence one instant, and now she wasn't. Hannah, who'd spent countless hours imagining something bad happening to her daughter, couldn't process it now that something had. Hannah stood frozen, hearing gasps and a scream from below. Eric didn't hesitate. He scaled the top plank and leaped. It wasn't his best move. Falling five or six feet to the soft, wet earth, he immediately crumbled to his hands and knees. He let out an unintelligible scream. Hoofbeats squished into the mud as the pony herd galloped away.

"Oh my God!" At first, Hannah thought it was her voice. She realized it belonged to the intruding woman. "Oh, Good Lord. That does it. I'm calling an ambulance."

Hannah looked at the woman blankly before nodding and managing to say thank you in a near whisper. She started to climb over the wooden plank. With one leg draped over the top plank, she visualized herself hoisting the other leg over, then carefully lowering herself down, only dropping a few feet and landing upright. Her feet sank immediately. Eric writhed on his back, clutching his knee. Livy has made her way over to him, her left arm hanging limply, her cries of daddy tinged with hurt. Hannah noticed the crowd of people still gathered, looking down at them. Her family had now become the zoo exhibit.

"Mommy, my arm hurts so bad," Livy said as Eric moaned.

"I think you broke it," Hannah said. "Listen, help is on the way."

"Mommy, I really wanted to go on the waterslides."

"I know, honey, I know."

Eric looked as if he wanted to say something, his eyes carrying something of an apology. For what? Busting his knee? Leaving her with too much of the parenting burden?

"Dislocated," was all he managed to grunt.

Maybe try a visualization technique, Hannah thought. Maybe she should ask her daughter and husband if they could see themselves speeding down a great waterslide, feeling the wondrous splash at the bottom when they would crash into a pool. But all she could see were the days and months ahead of doctors' appointments and physical therapy and getting dressed and cooking meals, a time where everything would be on her. Sleep? Downtime? Gone. Would she even be able to work? It was too much to think about.

She heard the sound of hoofs on mud and water growing louder. One of the ponies was coming back. Hannah looked up and saw an adult galloping toward them, its brown and white fur looking majestic in motion. She wondered if the animal intended to trample her family; she could never move them in time. Yet, the pony, a female — in Hannah's mind, a mother — stopped about 30 yards out, standing in a marshy pool, staring at them. As if checking if they were OK. Hannah heard the wail of a siren, a whisper at first, growing louder.

"Ma'am, paramedics are almost here,"

Hannah gazed at the pony's eyes, and the animal, it seemed, looked right back at her, trying to communicate, Hannah imagined, in some interspecies, universal language. Something like, this motherhood thing is tough, but you'll get through it, you'll do

what has to be done, to say what has to be said.

“You hear that, guys? Help is almost here,” she said. “We’ll get to that waterslide. Next summer. I promise.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bryan Schwartzman is an award-winning journalist who has interviewed future presidents, and former Israeli prime ministers and reported from Tunisia before the Arab Spring and from New Orleans after

Hurricane Katrina. He once wrote about the fate of a cow that had escaped a

slaughterhouse and roamed the streets of Queens. These days he works in nonprofit communications and hosts a podcast.

His fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has been published in the Schuylkill Valley Journal, Jewish Fiction and the Jewish Literary Review.

He grew up in New York City and has lived for the past 20 years in and around Philadelphia. He is married and has two daughters.

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ARTICLE

The Legacy of Eugene O'Neill for Writers with the Travis Bogard Artist Fellowship Program

by Jill Hedgecock

[Editor note: San Francisco Bay Area author, Jill Hedgecock, was selected for the 2022 Session-A-Day Use Fellowship program. She explains the program in this article and her experiences.]

Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site is a little-known treasure hidden in a sleepy East San Francisco Bay neighborhood of Danville, California. This is the site of an amazing opportunity for writers—the Travis Bogard Fellowship. The fellowship program was established by Eugene O'Neill Foundation in 2015 and is named for the late Travis Bogard, professor emeritus of Dramatic Arts at UC Berkeley and the O'Neill Foundation's first artistic director.

There are two types of Fellowships: Day Use, where writers are given access to the site in two 5-day increments between 9:00 am and 5:00 pm Wednesday through Friday, or an Artist in Residence Program. Artist in Residence fellows live off-site but spend their days at the nearby Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site. Housing, meals, and local transportation is provided to Artist in Residence fellows. Couples can be accommodated, but they finance only fellows. Children are not permitted. Residencies are available between April 1 and October 31. Each applicant can specify pre-



ferred residency dates—from one week to three weeks—but the length of stay is determined by the Artist in Residence Committee.

Nestled in the oak woodland hills of Las Trampas Regional Wilderness Park, Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site provides an idyllic setting for creative endeavors. Fellows are given sole access to two features of the historic site: the Trunk House, so named because it housed

Carlotta O'Neill's Louis Vuitton luggage, in the courtyard of Tao (pronounced "dow") House, the couple's primary residence in the 1930s and 1940s, and the Travis Bogard Library which is housed in the new barn.

The Trunk House is quaint and includes the use of an office desk, wi-fi and a wi-fi-accessible printer, complimentary coffee and tea, and a small refrigerator. Heating and air conditioning units are adequate to maintain a pleasant working environment. The window over the desk in the Trunk house overlooks an orchard and cattle pasture. A second window faces the Tao House courtyard. A leather recliner in

the corner offers a perfect sitting area to read background materials or meditate to quiet the mind and receive new inspiration.

The library houses an amazing array of materials, primarily for screenwriters, including O’Neill’s work, tomes about Shakespeare, and books by Bernard Shaw. The unique collection comprises donations to the Foundation by Sophus Winther, Horst Frenz, Travis Bogard, and others.

The Artists in Residence Fellowship is competitive, and screenwriters tend to receive the award. Each year, up to five artists are selected from a nationwide pool of applicants. Recipients from 2021 included Kate Bredeson, a Reed College professor, Chuck Goodin, and a founding member of an improvisational and interactive theatre company called RePlay. For 2022, Artists in Residence include Tommy Smith and Dassia Posner. Smith, a graduate of The Juilliard School’s writing program, has won five Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle awards for his play, *Firemen*. Smith has optioned his work, *Sleeper Car* with Blumhouse, *Demon Dreams to Dream-Works Animation*. Dassia N. Posner completed a post-doc at Harvard and received her Ph.D. in Drama from Tufts University is an Assistant Professor of Theatre History, Literature, and Criticism at Northwestern University.

Day use fellowship recipients are a mix of theatre scholars, playwrights, visual artists,

or writers. I was honored to have been selected for the Session A Day Use Program. The awarded two weeks can be consecutive or split. I chose a week in April and the second week in June. I spent virtually all my time in the Trunk House. To say that the property is quiet is an understatement.



Except for the daily tours that enter the courtyard once or twice a day, an occasional glimpse of the park staff, and hikers that sometimes pass by, writers are left alone. Inspired by the serene surroundings, I strove to maximize my time. During my two-week fellowship, I wrote freelance articles for several publications, including *The Diablo Gazette*, *Books N Pieces Magazine*, and *American West Magazine*. I also worked on two novels, one of which, *Queen of the Rhino*, will be published in August.

Fellows are required to tour Tao House as part of the fellowship. I felt sheepish that I had never heard of Eugene O’Neill before applying for the Fellowship, which is a bit

embarrassing given the man's accomplishments. O'Neill is the only playwright ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. He wrote 51 plays over 30 years, four of which were awarded Pulitzer Prizes. Six of his plays, including three works considered his greatest achievements, were written while living in Tao House.

O'Neill lived in the two-story, three-bedroom Tao house with its balcony and gated courtyard, with his third wife, actress Carlotta, between 1937 to 1944. O'Neill worked in a screened balcony where one window overlooks the Trunk house. The house is reported to have provided O'Neill with a scene-setting in "More Stately Mansions," which describes a garden courtyard and red door similar to the grounds of Tao House. Various actors have accepted roles to perform O'Neill's work, including Jason Robards, Jack Lemmon, Kevin Spacey, and Katharine Hepburn.

Katharine Hepburn initiated the idea of opening the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site to artists after the late Travis Bogard, professor emeritus of Dramatic Arts at UC Berkeley and The Eugene O'Neill Foundation's first artistic director, invited Katharine Hepburn to visit the newly Eugene O'Neill property after the Foundation acquired the house. In 1962, Hepburn played the part of Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's autobiographical play, "Long Day's Journey into Night," and became an hon-



orary Board Member of the Foundation. In 1992, Hepburn helped the Foundation acquire O'Neill's arhat's bed which had been sold off.

"After the Foundation acquired Tao House," said Linda Best, a Foundation Board Member, "Travis Bogard asked Hepburn what the Foundation should do with the site. Hepburn said that you should open the place to artists so they can experience the ambiance that inspired Eugene O'Neill."

Since then, dozens of artists have had the opportunity to exercise their creative minds. Lori Cassels, a songwriter and playwright is a repeat Day Use Fellow. During

her time at Tao House, Cassels developed an interest in Oona O’Neill Chaplin, O’Neill’s daughter. Oona married Charlie Chaplin and dated J. D. Salinger. During her June Day Use retreat, Cassels took advantage of the extensive Eugene O’Neill library available to Fellows. Marianne Lonsdale completed the second week of her Day Use fellow in March 2022.

“It was a great experience,” said Lonsdale. “I was able to go deeper in writing and the creative process and started a new novel.”

On the last afternoon of my fellowship, I was treated to an advance performance of “Into the Night, A Day at Tao House” by William Davies King, a 2018 Travis Bogard Artist in Residence Fellow, and Distinguished Professor of Theater at UC Santa Barbara. It was inspiring to watch the actors recreate O’Neill’s life.

At 5:00 pm on my final day, I packed up my belongings and felt nostalgia wash over me at the familiar scuffle of alligator lizards going into hiding as I stepped outside

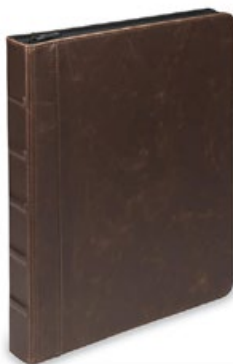
and locked the Trunk House door for the last time. As I headed to my car, past the old barn still buzzing with the energy of O’Neill’s words, I paused to take a photo of O’Neill’s original brick bench under an old oak tree. My mind’s eye conjured the playwright sitting there with Carlotta, enjoying the splendid view of the rolling hills of the home he considered his “safe harbor” and listening to the chatter of his pet chickens. Reluctant to leave this special place, I wander to the sign displaying O’Neill’s tribute written in his beloved dog’s voice: The Last Will and Testament of an Extremely Distinguished Dog, Silverdene Emblem O’Neill, marveling at the man’s creativity. I will forever be grateful to the Eugene O’Neill Foundation for accepting me into the program. To apply for the Artist in Residence or Day Use Program, visit

<https://eugeneoneill.org/fellows/>.

Jill Hedgecock is the award-winning author of [Between Shadow’s Eyes](http://www.jillhedgecock.com) and [Rhino in the Room](http://www.jillhedgecock.com)

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EXCERPT: *Wrong Time Wrong Place* by David P. Perlmutter

One minute, maybe even less, was all it took for my life to be turned completely upside down.

The result was positive.

A few hours earlier I'd been at work sitting behind my cluttered wooden desk at the estate agents I worked for in London, blissfully unaware of how my pretty ordinary day would come to such a catastrophic end.

For the majority of the day I'd been liaising with various clients, but more specifically trying to clinch a sale on a substantial property in the West End. The potential buyer, an arrogant prick with more money than sense, was being particularly difficult, demanding that various items be left in the house before he'd commit to buy. So when the phone rang for the umpteenth time that day and he requested that the hallway mirror be a part of the sale, I almost felt like buying him one myself, just to get the deal in the bag. On reflection, it had been a week of stupid, unnecessary negotiations and I couldn't wait to get the hell out of there. I called the seller, a middle-aged soon-to-be divorcée, and told her the news.

"He wants the hallway mirror."

"Oh, does he now?"

"Yes he does." I followed with the same irony. "And if he gets the mirror it's a done deal, Mrs Evans."

I shifted in my chair and threw some letters into my out tray. I could hear her on the end of the phone taking a long drag from her cigarette. I could almost smell the smoke weaving its way down the line as she pondered the proposition. A part of me knew she was enjoying this; enjoying the control. There were moments throughout the week when I actually thought she had no intention of selling at all and was just relishing the attention I was giving her. I'd seen it all before and couldn't help but wonder what kind of a wanker she'd been married to.

"It's just a mirror," I told her, opening the drawer and removing her file from its slot.

"But a rather nice one, don't you think?" I could hear her inhale another shot of her cigarette and I clenched my fist, willing it to be over.

"I guess it depends who's looking in to it." I flipped through the paperwork, found the prick's phone number and keyed it into the phone. "I think a mirror is only as beautiful as its beholder."

She chuckled, but said nothing.

"He has another appointment with us tomorrow, a similar property just around the corner from you actually and slightly cheaper too." I tapped my fingers on the desk, knowing I'd just told a fib. Justin, my colleague was nearly out the door as he tossed his coat over his shoulder. "Mrs Evans," I said, rolling my eyes at him, "I really need to give him your decision now. If you lose him it could take ages before you....."

"OK, OK," she interrupted. "He can have the bloody mirror."

"Finally!" I said, hanging up the phone. "I didn't think she was gonna crack!"

"Well done, mate," Justin said, striding over to my desk with his hand in the air. I high-fived him with a grin firmly fixed on my face.

"Worked out the commission yet?" he said, heading back to the door. Then he laughed. "That was a bloody stupid question, wasn't it? Come on, how much?"

"Five grand, give or take a few quid." Before I left the office I called Roger, my boss, to tell him the news. Justin waved goodbye and left me to lock up.

"Well done, David," he said. "Great work! Now get the hell out of there and get yourself a pint. You deserve it."

"I'm halfway there already," I responded, picking up my jacket.

"Well enjoy it. But don't go getting yourself hammered; you've got two more to settle tomorrow."

"Don't worry boss, just a couple and then I'll be heading home for an early night."

If only I had kept my word!

Half an hour later, I was at The Horse and Crown for a well-earned pint. It was a small place, but substantially cheaper and more welcoming than its sister pub on the main road, which always attracted the tourists.

I was halfway through my pint when Michael slapped me firmly on the back.

"Good to see you mate!" he said, slinging his jacket over the bar stool.

Mike was a good friend and a former work colleague. We'd met several years ago when London was new to us both, when we were desperately trying to carve out our careers amongst the hardened property executives in the capital. Our grit and determination had paid off, though: Mike was now a business development executive with a top London firm and after three promotions I was in a very comfortable place within the same firm at which we had initially met.

Mike rolled up his shirt sleeves, loosened his tie and took a swig of his drink.

"So, how's life in the fast lane, mate?"

"Can't complain," I answered. "Closed on a great deal earlier. It took all bloody week – cute owner, prick of a buyer – but just under 5k in my pocket."

"Nice one. Tonight's on you then buddy!"

"Well, I haven't got it yet," I took a sip of my drink and continued. "I've been running around like a blue-arsed fly too. I've got two girls off sick so I've been covering for them as well."

"Flu?"

"Something like that."

Mike shook his head.

"Man, you're so soft. Didn't I tell you not to hire women?" he said, pushing back the mop of blonde hair from his forehead.

I laughed.

"I wouldn't say a bad word against them. They keep the office ticking over, trust me."

"Trust you? You're a Jewish estate agent."

I rolled my eyes before him.

Michael the atheist laughed, then had a mouthful of his bitter. He had grown up in Northampton where he'd been privately educated and come to London just after graduating. He was a bit of a snob really, but a loveable one. He supported the local football team, The Cobblers, but he was more of a rugby man and his physique was testament to the fact. Just over six-foot-tall, broad shoulders and a neck to

Want to read more? Buy the book [HERE](#).

Our thank to David Perlmutter for permission to print this excerpt.

A CONVERSATION WITH...

Dr. Teresa Cody

Author and Wellness Provider



Dr. Teresa Cody earned her undergraduate degree at the University of Texas, then her Dental degree at the University of Texas Dental Branch in Houston in 1992. The next year she and her new husband, also a dentist, bought a practice in Sugar Land, Texas. Through a sequence of extraordinary events in 2018, Dr. Cody discovered the healing power of Platelet Rich Plasma. PRP for short. PRP is found in the plasma portion of the blood. Everyone has this priceless gift; however, most are unaware of its amazing healing powers which lead her to write her book entitled *You Healing You*. Her passion is to introduce others to the multiple health benefits of PRP treatments. In February 2019 Dr. Cody opened C & C Wellness to treat patients with PRP and other natural treatments.

WG: What promoted you to write a book on PRP, and how did that come about?

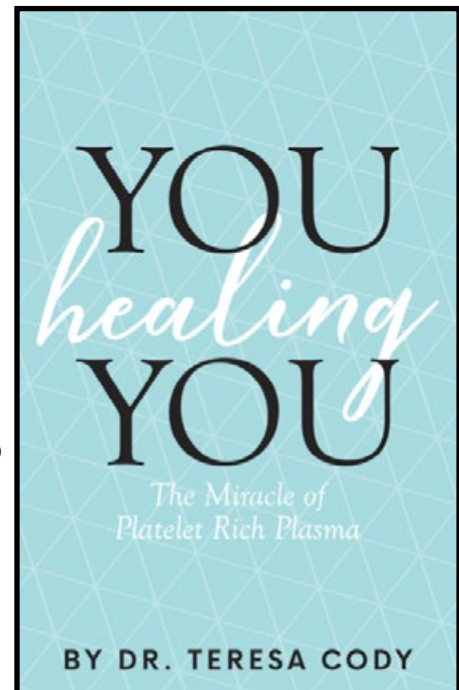
DTC: After working with PRP for 3 years in the Wellness clinic, I felt the need to write about our experiences and the many successes and healing we observed.

WG: What has been your personal experience with PRP if any?

DTC: PRP stands for Platelet Rich Plasma. It is in the plasma portion of your blood. A test tube of blood is drawn and placed in a centrifuge. After the blood is spun, it separates into two portions; the red blood cells fall to the bottom of the tube because they are heavier and the plasma floats on top. The plasma pipetted off and then the plasma is used for esthetics and in areas that are injured. The plasma contains at least 15 growth factors that direct the healing

process in the body. The growth factors are the directors of the healing process. They ensure processes like cell division, proliferation, differentiation, and survival. In other words, they direct new blood vessels to be made, new skin produced, increases collagen and everything needed to repair the body.

My nurse and I have



treated many injuries, pulled tendons, ligaments, muscle pain, diabetic ulcers, eye drops for dry eyes, nasal spray to reduce allergies, and esthetic facial procedures.

WG: Is PRP the flavor of the moment insofar as newer health treatments?

DTC: PRP has been used in dentistry for over 30 years. It has been used in conjunction with bone grafts. Bone grafting is necessary for dental implants to be successful. PRP naturally clots and is placed in extraction sites as a perfect natural band-aid. Post-operative pain is severely reduced and most patients do not need any pain medication.

WG: How did you find the process of writing the book? Problems?

DTC: I remembered this writer when asked how he was so prolific. He said he wrote 200 crappy words a day. I thought, I can write 200 crappy words a day. Some days I wrote more and some days it was less, but what I tried to do was write and not edit.

WG: Any future books planned?

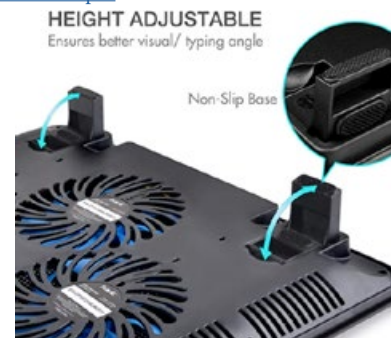
DTC: I have been considering writing about our son Neal who has Down syndrome and our journey through that experience.

If you'd like to learn more, check out Dr. Cody's book [HERE](#).

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

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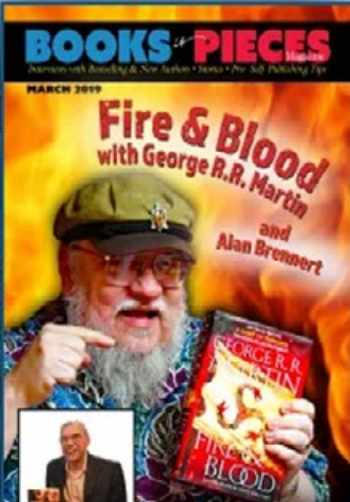
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