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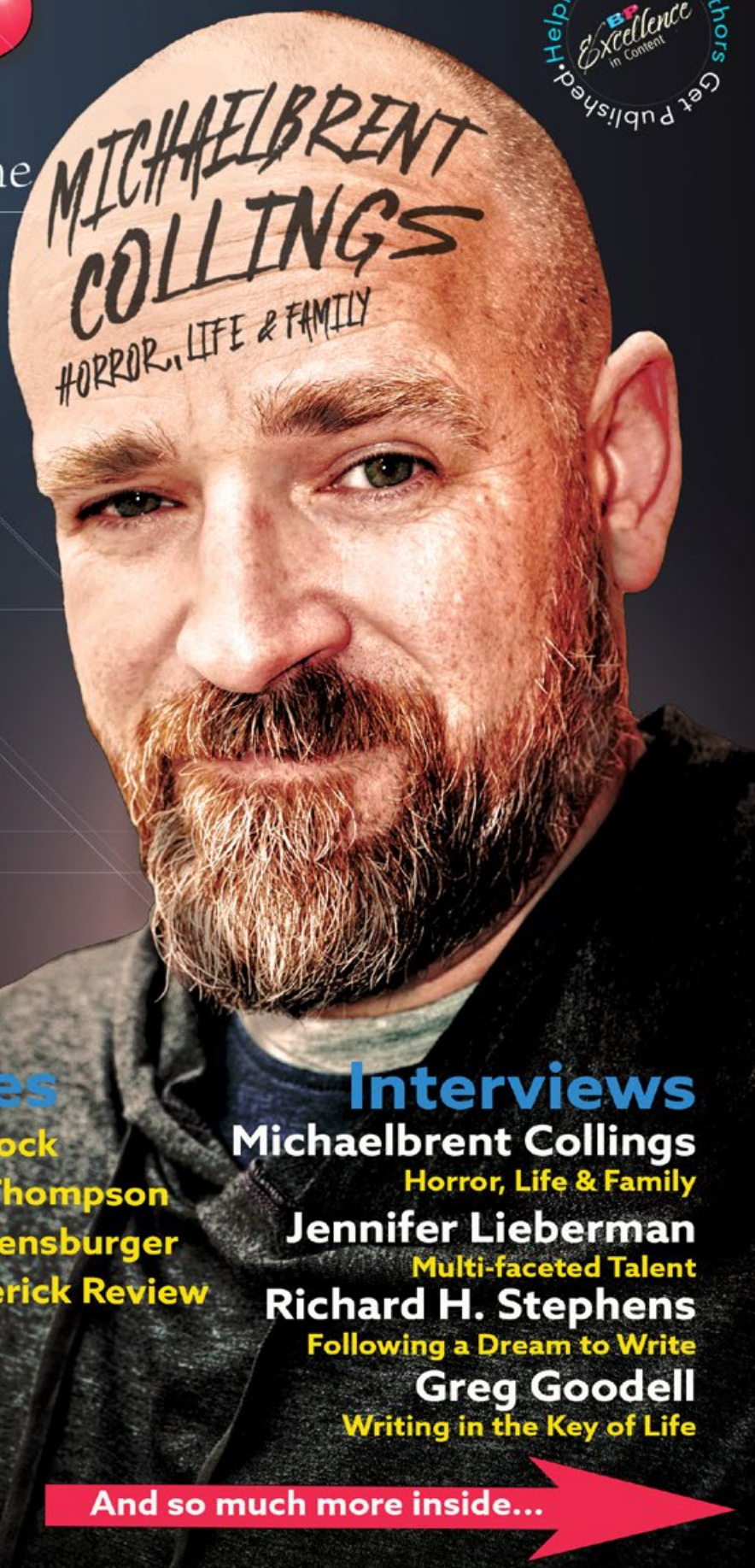
Multi-faceted Talent

Richard H. Stephens

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Writing in the Key of Life



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# JULY 2022

“If the writing is honest it cannot be separated from the man who wrote it.”  
~Tennessee Williams

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# Talent Lies Everywhere!

Welcome to the July issue. The more I publish Books & Pieces Magazine, the more I realize that talent lies all around us. There is no shortage of talent, people gifted in a wide range of abilities, each with a story to tell, a journey they've taken, filled with rises and falls, successes and failures. Each interview offers something slightly different. I want to know how these people tick. What're their fears. What drives them. And, more importantly for me, what can I learn from them. Life is a journey of learning. Death is when you stop learning. And even that is debateable.

**Michaelbrent Collings** is a well known, award-winning, bestselling, creative force of nature who has pushed boundaries in his life to reach a place of relative stability. I say 'relative' because, as you will hear in his own words, life is an unpredictable journey that one has to adapt to, weather, survive and hope for fairer days ahead.

I heard of Michaelbrent through a circuitous route: one day while looking up people from my past, I searched for a creative writing teacher of mine from decades long gone. I knew at the time that he was a published author and poet, with many books under his belt. I found him and realized that he had moved to Idaho, where I live. His name is Michael J. Collings, and his son is Michaelbrent.

And then I received a message from Michaelbrent. He was also in Idaho, not far from me. A lunch interview was in order. And what did I learn? Many things. He



is a pragmatist who puts family first, values honesty, and despite the image of a horror writ-

er, is a very decent and genuine person. Read the interview for an in-depth look at the man and his writing.

**Greg Goodell** hails from Emmett, Idaho, a rural community well known for its cherries, fruits and vegetable harvests. He is a man with many talents, although he humbly denies most of them. He has played in bands with many notables, written songs, recorded albums, performed live, taught all manner of instruments, and, most recently put together Dynamic Arts Studio where he does everything from sound management, recording, producing, teaching youngsters as well as adults, mostly as a one man organization, although friends help out along the way.

I met Greg some years ago when I decided it might be nice to learn to play the acoustic guitar. I've watched him disassemble, repair and reconstruct old analog



multi-track devices, guitars, you name it.

What did I learn from Greg? You're everything you allow yourself to be. And

enjoy the ride.

Also in this issue, two authors, **Jennifer Lieberman**, a multi-talented woman whose career to date has covered everything from writing, producing, directing, acting, music and more. And **Richard H. Stephens** whose journey to publication took awhile--life gets in the way. From a boyhood dream of writing to meeting some literary giants, Richard has enjoyed a life well lived, and now success to go with it.

The short stories featured this month are our short story contest winners, **Daniel Jackson**, **Katherine Soriano** and **Maggie Nerz Iribarne**. In addition, an interesting story by **Otto Alexander** I'm sure you will enjoy.

**Lance Thompson** offers another interesting 'Tales from the Script.' If you are a screenwriter I would be interested hearing from you. I'd like the screenwriting section to grow.

**Jill Hedgecock's 'BookEnds'** WITH another excellent review.

My 'Writing with Class' column tackles how intuitive writing, or emotional writing is a learned skill and how to improve your initial drafts with just a few changes.

**The Big Screen** has two movie reviews: Top Gun: Maverick with NO SPOILERS, and Jurassic World: Dominion. You'll want to read it.

**In Memoriam** to author Jim Christina, who passed away late June.

May I ask a favor? This issue is available in many formats and promoted on many social media sites. If you see it posted, please help us to spread the word by sharing it on your feed, with friends and family.

Enjoy this issue.



William Gensburger  
Author/Publisher

## WIN 3 PRINT ISSUES OF Books & Pieces Magazine April, May & June issues. and 2 mini print copies of the April issue featuring Tosca Lee on the cover.

I have one set of the three issues (8"x10") and two mini-editions (4"x6") to give away.

To enter, simply send me an email at [EDITOR@BOOKSNPIECES.COM](mailto:EDITOR@BOOKSNPIECES.COM) and let me know the following.

- 1) What you like about B&P Magazine
- 2) What you don't like about the magazine
- 3) What you would like to see in future issues.

This will help us fine-tune the magazine and improve it. The most useful suggestion will win the 3 issues (regular size). 2nd and 3rd place will each receive a Mini print edition.



**DEADLINE: Monday, July 11, 2022**

**SHORT STORY**

# *My Father, the Principal* by Maggie Nerz Iribarne

The son of a principal watches in horror as his father creates a new school full of division and a focus on the rich and powerful.

## **Pep Rally**

**W**arr-i-ors! Warr-i-ors!  
Back when I started there, in seventh grade, my mother and I attended the St Michael's football games together. Standing in as Dad's wholesome family unit, we perched on a bleacher, our smiles chiseled and stuck. Principal Dad came out on the podium in his purple and white jersey and the crowd went wild. His cheeks matched his fire-red hair as he pontificated about the glory and history of our school. He raised his fist in the air at the end and asked us all to stand to sing the school anthem. People were crying. I'm serious. Tears of pride, joy, nostalgia, maybe all three. He had that effect on people. He got the crowd chanting Warr-i-ors! Warr-i-ors! Over and over again. But somewhere in there the crowd switched and started chanting Mc-Ardle. Mc-Ardle! Dad beamed from his place before us, his mouth closed in a tightening of pride, his eyes full of water. We were with him, totally, and he could have no greater joy.

Warr-i-ors! Warr-i-ors!  
Mc-Ardle! Mc-Ardle!

## **The Truth**

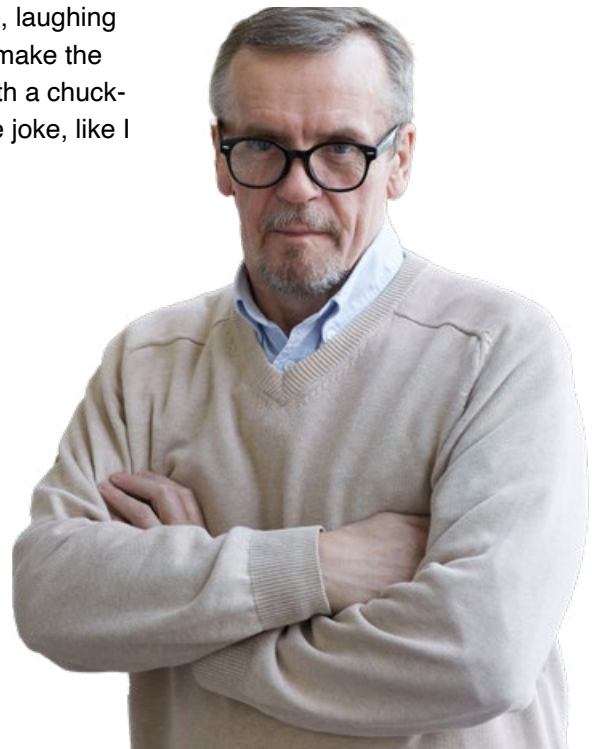
I didn't feel loved by Dad. I wasn't loved by him. I embarrassed him. I had pimples. I tended to overeat and gain weight. And, even though he got me on the team, I wasn't good at football.

"Do you want to have a catch, Dad?" I'd ask on the rare occasions he was home, hidden behind his newspaper or busy at his study desk.

"I would if you would actually catch the ball, Pizza Face," he'd say, looking up, laughing a bit, trying to make the insult better with a chuckle, like I got the joke, like I didn't mind because he was being funny.

## **Tony**

I met Tony at Sage Park when I kicked my football to no one and it came sailing back to me with force. Eight year old



**I didn't  
mind  
because  
he was  
being  
funny.**

Tony had a wide smile, a lopsided face, bright blonde hair and eyelashes, a skeleton body, and a pronounced lisp. With my dark hair and stocky frame, we totally clashed, but that ball kept passing between us. We hung out constantly, haunting the public library and giggling over Captain Underpants books. We quoted it: Separate classes lead to separate lives, which inevitably leads to robots. We knew even then that quote applied to us, since we had a tight friendship with several big differences lurking between us: Tony's parents were divorced--mine weren't. Tony struggled in school--I didn't. Tony was poor--I wasn't. Finally, I went to Catholic school--Tony didn't.

That last difference changed, because when we were in eighth grade, Tony got a scholarship to the co-ed St. Francis High. Principal Sister Janet did a lot of fundraising for her scholarship program for at-risk kids and had developed resources for struggling students, a very unusual thing in a Catholic school. So, in eighth grade, Tony went to St. Francis and I continued at St. Michael's.

Before his first day at the new school, Tony nagged me about what tie to wear, what socks, what shoes. He asked how he should act, what he should do about not knowing anyone.

"I'm just hoping I can meet someone like you, someone cool," he said, not realizing how uncool I really was at school.

"Just act like you don't care. Get out there on the playground with that football and throw it to someone, just like you did with me."

We threw the football back and forth for the rest of that afternoon, until the mosquitoes got annoying. I warmed with deep satisfaction. I didn't have to feel guilty anymore. Tony would be okay. He

was getting what he deserved.

## **One School-One Purpose**

In our ninth grade year, something big happened: St. Michael's fused with St. Francis. Sr. Janet became an English teacher in the new setup, no longer a principal. The archdiocese chose Dad as the principal over the combined school. Those in charge said they wanted this new school to be truly great. Dad jumped at the challenge.

He created a slogan and made banners, put it at the top of the school stationary. It became the last thing said every morning during announcements over the PA: We are St. Michael's: We are GREAT! At assemblies, pep rallies, games, and even at monthly Mass, Dad had all of us repeat his mantra. Some kids had it on a bumper sticker on their car. We did too, of course. I have to admit it was fun at first, the school spirit, the combined desire for greatness. Who doesn't want to be great? Dad wore a St. Michael's is Great tie to work every single day. He high-fived students every morning as we all filed in from the buses. A lot of people got a bounce from his energy and his sense of purpose.

Division lurked in the corners of the school, like a vine climbing a pole. At lunch, I was the only St. Michael's kid who sat with St. Francis kids. Most St. Michael's kids called St. Francis kids Francis Freaks. I tried to ignore that.

## **The Haves**

At lunch, Tony swished his soft pretzel around in a blob of mustard. The din of the cafeteria caused him to yell a little, "Okay, so I heard that the families who give money to the football team don't pay as much to go here, and, like, get help with studying."

“Huh,” I said, “Well that doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Yeah,” Tony grabbed his stuff and left lunch early.

In my room, trying to do my homework, I read my father’s constant St. Michael’s Twitter feed.

We are St. Michaels! Everything is for the greatness of this school! Keep the faith! We are St. Michaels! We are GREAT!!!!

### **The Have Notes**

Tony banged on our door at 9 PM.

“Have you heard?”

I stood and looked at him.

He rolled his eyes. “Nothin’ ever happens to you. They’re taking away the scholarship program and special ed and music!”

I stood in silence, hands limp by my sides.

“Aren’t you gonna say somethin’? Or do somethin’?” He turned from the door into the encroaching night.

### **Protest**

Dad’s Tweet after Sister Janet led her first protest against the loss of the scholarship program:

Sr. Janet is an old, bitter, want-to-be principal! I am not sure whose side she’s on, but it’s certainly not St. Michael’s, or God’s!

Dad received 300 likes for this.

My new girlfriend, Connie, also a St. Francis kid, sporting her pixie cut and a nose ring, waltzed up to my lunch table, slammed down her books and said, “Well, have you heard the latest?”

“Yes. I heard it all.”

She ignored me.

“So we’re losing a ton of kids

next year. But guess what we’re getting?”

My stomach began to turn.

“Rich kids? Better football players?” I asked.

Dad was even trying to get us into a different football league, so we could play against the big public schools. He no longer wanted to play against the schools he said in his feed were “Losers! Less than US!” Some teachers quit, those that complained just disappeared. I wished I could disappear, switch schools, switch families.

Connie wrote for the school newspaper, so I kind of knew what was coming next.

### **Column**

Who is Mr. McCardle anyway?

This week The St. Michael’s Gazette has information about several anonymous communications detailing a secret past life of our principal.

Marilyn, whose name is changed here to protect her privacy, the first woman to write to us, confirmed a past sexual relationship with married Principal McCardle.

We now have emails from six women who have had sexual relations with Mr. McCardle, one woman even said she had an abortion after a relationship with our principal.

Dad denied it all. The Board met, but he had chosen the three new members, all his buddies, so they supported him.

Connie got suspended after the article went viral.

### **Monster**

...a  
secret  
past life  
of our  
principal

...

The same year of all the cutbacks, our junior year, the St. Michael's Warriors were on fire. Everyone forgot Dad's indiscretions because we were beating everyone. Tony and I lived on the bench. Tony wouldn't be coming back for senior year, but even he had trouble not getting swept up into the roar of the crowds and the band playing "We Will Rock You" again and again. We had made it all the way to the championship against the big public school, Liberty High.



During the cheerleaders' halftime show, Sr. Janet and a band of students holding "Save St. Michael's from McCardle" and "Save our Scholarships" and "St. Michael's is More than Football" signs marched onto the field, beating drums and clashing cymbals and blowing whistles and shouting, disrupting the show. Frigid air, shock, and maybe some minor PTSD kept us all transfixed, unable to move or react, but into the void swear words erupted and people started throwing cups and whatever they had in their hands. Fans charged the field, attacking the protesters. The father of the quarterback punched Sr. Janet in the face, a sight that made all the sound in my ears get sucked into some frozen space, my breath stop cold in my chest. I could see Connie and Tony down on the field, holding their phones high in the air, recording. I stayed alone-my mother stayed at home-on my bench, sick with

fear, embarrassment, worry for my friends, for my mom. My eyes scanned the bleachers looking for Dad. I found him, standing in his elegant dark wool coat, watching the chaos. Later, we would all see my father's Twitter messages, typed out during the chaos.

Fight St. Michael's! Fight! We are GREAT! We are GREAT!

Some of the Board denounced the violence. Patrick Maloney, my father's favorite golfing buddy, wrote, This is not behavior suitable for a Catholic school. This is an abomination.

A few days later, he resigned from the Board. Dad tweeted,

Good riddance to traitors!

Dad said his Tweets were solely about the football game and had no malicious intent.

Most of those on his side believed him.

## September

The first day of my senior year, I entered a school foyer draped with state championship banners. My father, decked out in school colors,

high-fived everyone while the band cranked out "We Are the Champions" ad nauseum. Kids greeted me and even hugged my limp body, but they weren't my friends. A fake smile hung on my face as I moved down the hallway to homeroom while those still passionate about St. Michael's, my father, the principal, chanted the syllables of his and my name Mc-Car-dle! Mc-Car-dle! Mc-Car-dle!

Most of the St. Francis kids and teachers were gone. Everyone seemed so happy with it this way, like the fusion of the two schools never happened, like change is a bad thing that should be stomped out, avoided at all cost. Like only certain people were allowed to come here, excel here. I pictured a snow globe with St. Michael's inside, all of us holding our breath under water. All of us the same, locked in, staying the same, forever.

That last first day of school my classes blurred



in succession. A crucifix hung on every classroom wall above the front whiteboards. In each, I stared above my classmates' heads and pondered Jesus, the son of God. I looked at him, his hands and feet punctured by nails. Being the son of God didn't do him any good.

I got that. ■

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 52, living her writing dream*



*in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. She writes about teenagers, witches, the very old, bats, cats, priests/nuns, cleaning ladies, runaways, struggling teachers, and neighborhood ghosts, among many other things. She keeps*

*a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.*

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[Editor note: Maggie's story was our Short Story Contest third place winner.]

**Submit your stories [HERE](#).**

---

# Story Starter

Here is the start of what could be a wonderful short story. Finish it off and submit it to me. We'll publish our first choice in the August issue. Submit directly to [editor@BooksNPieces.com](mailto:editor@BooksNPieces.com)

## **AMERICAN AIR**

Story Starter by William Gensburger

It was, he knew, to be his last breath. Already he was becoming pale, lips bluish, eyes glazing over, his body preparing for the final moment. And he could see himself in the reflection of the mirrored entry hall, crumpled on the floor like an unwanted toy tossed carelessly by an invisible child.

His mind was racing, splinters of thoughts and feeling, some long forgotten or buried, now emerging for one last hurrah, forty-five years of accumulated debris that had never been properly sorted through. What to tell them? His children? His wife? His mother? Who was dead already he couldn't say, no longer recalling the car accident of his thirty-fifth year that had wiped out his wife and daughter, leaving only one son. His mother had left him much farther back than that, a distressing blow to his psyche that had become complacent with stability and continuity. Enemies became friends as morality transformed into debauchery. Friends became strangers as familiarity led to contempt and disregard. He couldn't say anymore whose wife he'd seduced. He remembered it was on a boat. Off the coast of Mexico. He did not recall owning a boat. He could not recall his own name. He remembered that the sex was good.

The thoughts were like splinters of light that pricked at his mind and then subsided. A shower of light, a rain of needles, coated everything. The image in the mirror was blurred by it, losing resolution, detail. He thought: All that I was will be gone. Every hope and dream and disappointment will be wiped clean. Sunday school! Cramming God into places too tight to fit. Identity. Self-respect. Sovereignty. Nationality. What nationality? What piece allowed me to fit? Whose air did I breathe?

All of his life he had longed for the answers. And only now did he realize them. One last laugh, gagging within the final exhale. He could hear the haunting sound of his breath escaping his body like the echo of a cold winter wind racing through the underground tunnels he had played in as a child. The light consumed him in a bio-electric dance of decay until he was not even aware of his own consciousness, his existence.

It was all quite meaningless now.



Get ready for an outrageous, racy adventure with Jennifer Lieberman's multi-award-winning and Amazon #1 Best Selling debut novel.

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-Kirkus Reviews



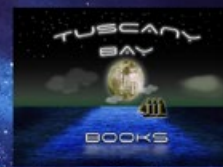
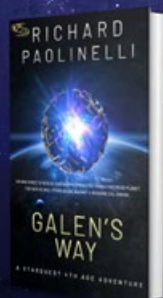
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# Calendar of Events

## JULY 2022

- **Susan Sands with Saul Rosenberg** - The Inside Story (Online Event) July 12, 2022 - 5:30pm <https://www.bookpassage.com/event/susan-sands-saul-rosenberg-inside-story-online-event>
- **Breaking In: How to Successfully Pitch a Book for Any Genre**, July 14. <https://www.writersonlineworkshops.com/courses/breaking-in-how-to-successfully-pitch-a-book-for-any-genre>
- **Alexis Schaitkin with Clare Beams - Elsewhere** (Online Event) July 14, 2022 - 11:00am
- **Sun Valley Writer's Conference** July 16-July 18. <https://www.bookpassage.com/event/alexis-schaitkin-clare-beams-elsewhere-online-event>
- **QUERYING: Take a Breath, You Got This**. July 21 <https://www.writersonlineworkshops.com/courses/querying-take-a-breath-you-got-this-4smk>
- **18th annual San Francisco Writers Conference**: July 21–24, 2022 <https://www.sfwriters.org/2022-conference/>
- **Writer's Digest Annual Conference**: July 28-31, 2022 <https://writersdigestconference.com>

# WORD BANK

*There's always room for another word!*

**Cruciverbalist**: Someone who enjoys or is skilled at solving crosswords.

**Mononym**: A person's name consisting of one word, typically a first name without a surname.

**Eudaemonism**: A system of ethics that bases moral value on the likelihood of actions producing happiness.

**Sesquipedalian**: characterized by long words; long-winded

Hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliophobic: Someone or somebody who is fearful of long words

**Pulchritudinous**: physically beautiful

**Psychotomimetic**: of, relating to, involving, or inducing psychotic alteration of behavior and personality

**Trichotillomania**: an abnormal desire to pull out one's hair

**Omphaloskepsis**: contemplation of one's navel as an aid to meditation; also: lack of will to move, exert, or change: inertia

**Myrmecophilous**: fond of, associated with, or benefited by ants

<https://www.merriam-webster.com>

**A CONVERSATION WITH...**

**MINION MASTER, BESTSELLING HORROR, SCI-FI AUTHOR, AND A TRULY NICE GUY**

# **MICHAELBRENT COLLINGS**

**M**ichaelbrent Collings is an American horror novelist. He wrote the screenplays for two horror films: **Barricade** and **Darkroom**. He has many self-published novels, with two of his books being finalists for the Bram Stoker Award in 2016, and two being finalists for the Whitney Awards in 2014 and 2017.

I met with Michaelbrent in Meridian, Idaho, for a lunch interview and found him to be the opposite of what you might expect. Many images of him are silhouetted, darker, brooding, compounded by the shaved head and beard, certainly the appearance of a horror author. What I found was a genuinely warm human being, both introspective and yet often gregarious, despite a self-professed introverted nature.

He calls the horror genre the 'genre of hope' as it externalizes elements of right and wrong. Collings was a construction contract dispute litigator before becoming a writer, and after being rejected by traditional publishers, he self-published [Run](#) on Amazon in 2010, where it became a bestselling e-book in multiple genres, despite a lack of market-



All photos in this article by William Gensburger

ing. Since then has enjoyed a relatively constant measure of success, but for the meanderings that we discussed during our interview, with a total of 50 books and numerous screenplays, including an internationally-bestselling thriller, fantasy, science fiction, mystery, humor, young adult, and middle-grade works, and even western romance novels under the pen name Angelica Hart.

WG: Michaelbrent, thanks for spending with me today. I'll jump right in. You wrote your first story at age four. First published at age 15. What was the first story published about?

MbC: Oh, I can't remember what it was called, but it was in a local newspaper. They were like, we're doing a Halloween thing...

WG: Was it a horror story?

MbC: Yes, it was. And it was about this grade outside of a town that people used to crash at all the time. So I wrote this story. It was in Thousand Oaks, which everyone called T. O., and this guy crashes because he was sick of the place and tried to leave—it was kind of a weird fantasm, and this old man, whose name is Thadius Orton (T.O), and he represents the spirit of the city. And once you're there, you're there. Leaving is why people die on the grade because the city doesn't want them to go. And I thought there's no way in hell they're going to publish this. I mean, this is not like a fluffy...

WG: This is the one you wrote at four.

MbC: No, I was 15. At four, I was writing, the parrot escaped from the cage. But even then, that's cool with my dad because most dads look at it, and

they're like, it's so good. And my dad went, 'Good job. Let's talk about structure.' So he really was my best teacher.

WG: Your father was the creative writing professor at Pepperdine University in Malibu. I had his classes. He was always very soft-spoken. I remember that.

MbC: Yeah. [laughing]. When I went to Pepperdine, I worked at the library, and people would find out who my dad was, that he was a creative writing director, and they always had one of two reactions, it was 'He's so sweet.' And I knew they'd never been in his classes because the ones who had, were like, 'He's really quiet. And then he murders your papers.'

WG: Exactly. I remember that vividly. You worked in Hollywood. Tell me about Hollywood?

MbC: Hollywood was cool. I mean, it came at a

“  
**IT'S A  
HIGH  
IMPACT  
CAREER**”



good time. It was propitious.

WG: And you got a Terminator script?

MbC: Yes. I got this Terminator script, and it just was so cool seeing this new thing. And then I just started writing screenplays because I loved them. It wasn't as though I had dreams to do that. Everyone has dreams of winning the lottery and this would happen, but I wasn't planning on it, which is why I actually became a lawyer. But I loved writing. And so every night around 10:00 p.m., I'd start writing, and my wife would go to sleep, and I'd write for two, three, four hours, then wake up the next morning at six and start the whole day again.

And I just loved writing screenplays. And so I did. And one year, I had a bunch of them. And I found out there was this thing called the Nichol Fellowship, a big screenwriting opportunity. And I entered four of my screenplays. All of them got to the semi-finals. And that was really cool because people notice your name, and you get calls. But people noticed my name appearing on the list four times, and I got a buttload of calls. And it was really nice, too, because I could weed out the schmoozers instantly because they'd call and say, 'I saw your name. I think your screenplay sounds fantastic.' And I'd go, 'Which one?' And they would have this pause. I would say, 'All right, we'll talk.' I don't want to shoot anybody down for doing their job.

I landed a manager off that, a great guy named Tariq Jalil, and he was great. We're still friends. I've been friends with all of my ex-representatives. They're all good people and nice. But he didn't get anything sold for me, and we parted ways.

And a couple of years later, this guy just called from one of the studios that we had pitched to, and everyone above him basically got fired. So he's the new head of this little arm, and the new big boss walked in and said, 'I want to do a ghost story.' And because I had kept up with this gentleman—his name's Richard Lowell—for years only because I thought he was a cool guy. And so he literally had my screenplay sitting on the corner of his desk when his new boss walked in.

WG: And this was how long after you wrote the screenplay?

MbC: Probably four or five years.

WG: And how long after the fellowship?

MbC: Another two years. And it was surprising because he's like, we want you to come in, and I had a contract in my hand the next day.

WG: Wow.

MbC: Yeah. Super fun.

WG: And do you like Hollywood?

MbC: I do. A lot of writers hate it because their work is so important to them, and they're not flexible. And I understand that mentality, although I disagree. For me, I'm just selling a product, and hopefully, it's a product that I'm good at and helps people because it's important to me that I leave the world a little better than I found it. But they're not my babies. I have four babies at home. So when they came back, and they said, we want to do rewrites, Okay, but, it's not going to be as good, but this is a really nice check you're sending me. So I'm happy to do it. And that was nice for them, too, because they didn't have some writer who was screaming and yelling.

WG: Given all of that, why has your focus been on novels as opposed to screenplays.

MbC: It pays the bills.

WG: So if it turned around tomorrow?

MbC: I'd do it. I always have Hollywood stuff kind of in the fire.

WG: Well, I know from reading your comments in some other interviews that you write with the movie

in mind.

MbC: I very typically write them at the same time. So by the time the fans see a book, there's a screenplay sitting locked and loaded, which is helpful. I was on the phone recently with a Hollywood producer, and they were interested in this property, and I could tell that about halfway through the call. I'm thinking, I already have the screenplay for this because the way they were approaching it was it's going to cost a lot to develop, and that's always a problem. And I said, 'Well, I have a script. I'll just send that to you.' And it was like Angels had walked out of heaven.

WG: I read a lot of scripts because I love scripts, too. A good script reads like a good novel—it takes you away.

MbC: I was a reader at Fox Studios for a produc-



tion company there and also for this other independent production company. I did that for almost two years. And you either say 'Pass,' which is a no, thank you, or 'Recommend' or 'Highly recommend.' And we got paid by the script. So you can tell on the first page that this is going to be I'm earning my money, because even screenwriters who are represented by big agencies would have grammar mistakes, there'd be typos, and even though that doesn't affect the story, if there's that low a quality control, you can tell they're not caring much about it.

WG: Right.

MbC: So the whole time I did that, I think I only said recommend to three screenplays.

WG: That's not many. I heard that the average reader has a couple of thousand scripts to get through and pretty quickly.

MbC: Yes, but a good screenplay, you do forget you're reading, and you get sucked into it. It's even better in a way because a book is so much more of a high-intensity mental process.

WG: Right.

MbC: And for a screenplay to work, that is such an important quality of writing because they are writing for a reader. Ultimately it gets to the screen, but the first person that reads it—the writer has to blow that movie up in that reader's head. Screenplays are so fun, and I'll write screenplays forever, even if someone—like an omen in the sky—says Michaelbrent will never sell a screenplay, I like doing it.

WG: Well, you've got a lot of success. I'm assuming you're at a point where basically that is your income.

MbC: Best definition of are you a real writer I ever heard was that you can tell you're a real writer

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THE ONLY  
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WRITING**

if the only thing worse than writing is not writing and that's totally true. My wife can tell when I have a story locked up. She's like you're being cranky, you're not present, and I am deeply in love with my wife. I love my kids. They're so awesome, so I want to be good to them, and she'll kick me out to do work. Because she's like, you're not engaged with us so.

WG: Is that the downside of working at home? I know that I'll work in the car or take the car somewhere and park and dictate.

MbC: Well, for reality, when I'm researching, I'll go to places that I'm going to write about. And my wife has to lecture me because I'm not self-aware. She dressed me today. She reminds me to put on my pants in the morning. I'm just not good at self-care. So I will go out, and I drive up to some random place and be like, 'Can I look around?' And you can see them be like, 'No, you're going to blow us up.' But it's funny because as soon as I say, 'Oh, I'm an author,' they're like, 'He's harmless. He's probably incompetent, not very good at life. Let him look around, give him an access pass to the nuclear power plant. He's not going to do anything important with it.'

WG: [laughs] All right, let's digress for a minute. Tell me about your *girlfriend*, Angelica Hart.

MbC: So a couple of years back... Writing is not a law firm job—I've had to put my nose to the grindstone at the law firm. You bring it clients, you work hard, you don't get sued too much, *too much*, and you'll be a partner.

An author can be a super big success one moment and have no readers the next. I knew a very successful author who sold millions of books in the 80s, and we were talking—such a nice guy—and he wanted to break into screenwriting. So I said, you should get this service. It's \$50 for six months. And he goes, 'I can't afford that.' And I thought, wow, this is a weird industry because he was up there with Stephen King when he was writing his on-fire stuff.

And we went through a bad dry spell ourselves. And I'm wondering what do I do? Trying to pivot, because people see me as a thriller writer or a horror writer, but I'm just a storyteller. And a bunch of my writer friends are like, do romance. There's so much money in romance. So I wrote Western romance, and I did it partly as a monetary decision and partly because Westerns are fun. I love *Man from Snowy River. Return to the Man from Snowy River*. My grandpa would make me watch John Wayne movies until the end of time.

WG: But how was it as a writer, though?

MbC: It was super fun, it was profitable, it was good. I just knew men don't sell in romance, so I made a pen name, Angelica Hart. It got us through that point. My home base is horror, and it's not because I'm in love with horror, it's because that's what



sells the most. I do love horror, but I love all kinds of stories. Western romance is fun, and it was good during its time, and it made us some money. Part of the reason I quit was because it was strenuous being Angelica Hart—I would get 40-year-old divorcees emailing me about their terrible husband. Everybody with a penis needs to burn in hell. It was not my intent to have this happen. But for some women, it became like, ‘Oh, she understands me.’ And I felt bad because you either say, well, I do have a penis, and then they’re mad at you, or you lie to them, and you feel like crap all the time. So I came out of the closet as Angelica after five months. Five books.

WG: What happened then?

MbC: Nothing. I had moved on to other stuff. And that’s something you’ve got to be able to do if you’re going to be any good.

WG: Any comments about it?

MbC: No, not a one. Now, I’m sure the women that felt betrayed just put me on their block list.

WG: That’s interesting. I got a bunch of quotes that you’ve reportedly said. They’re great quotes, and I’m going to reuse them, but I have to read them to you so you can confirm them.

MbC: Okay.

WG: If you’re doing your job at page one, they’ve forgotten about the cover blurb, and they’re just all-in on your book.

MbC: I like that one. And I’ll say yes even if I didn’t say them if they’re smart-sounding. I only say two or three smart things a year. So you dig back as far as you got to?

WG: I went through about six or seven different interviews, but what I try to look for is—I don’t want to keep rehashing the same thing. What I want on the page is to show you, your personality—the books



speak for themselves.

MbC: I'm always so delighted when I get a new question.

WG: I try, but it doesn't always work. You think in movie terms. We already covered that. The reader is actually buying the book description, and I really agree with you that it's one of the hardest things to do well. And of course, I know about your Fiverr gig doing that for people. Are you getting a response on it?

MbC: I'm actually turning down work a lot if I'm just too busy at the time.

*[Editor note: Michaelbrent offers book logline descriptions on Fiverr. You can find him at <https://www.fiverr.com/mb-collings>]*

WG: Do you find it easy to come out with descriptions, or is it just that you know how to hone in on the key bullet points that really make it work?

MbC: A little bit of both? I did one in 20 minutes, and for another one, I spent 3 hours because the way they had written it, their information to me, wasn't tremendously clear. And I could kind of tell they wanted me to read the whole book.

WG: You tried to find a traditional publisher for two years. Now you've got all these books. You obviously have a measure of success. Have you any interest in traditional publishing now?

MbC: I would, and I'm actually going to have a phone call with one very large agency soon. I know going in, they're going to want me to give up all these rights in exchange for less money. So my kind of litmus is will you pay me upfront more

than I would have made over the life of the novel? Sure. I'll go in on it with you. But every time I've taken a chance on an outside group, they have used a shotgun method, and I'm just one more pellet against the wall. Still, I'd work with just about anybody in the right situation.

WG: But do you find, at this point in your career, any value in traditional publishing?

MbC: So the value, if I ever did, would be, number one, the advance, by which I mean, again, it's got to be sure money coming in. Let's say I look at my book and say this book will probably make me \$35,000, which doesn't sound like a lot to people who are thinking Hollywood blockbusters, but most writers would give their left (body part of your choice) for that. So if they're going to pay me \$36,000, I'm in and I care very little about the rest of it. So that has to be there. The other advantage, of course, is they've got extended reach. I get reviewed by Publishers Weekly and some pretty big places, but I'm not a sure thing. Right now, I'm just lucky that they'll do that for

an indie.

WG: But you've got a quantity that says you're not a one-shot wonder.

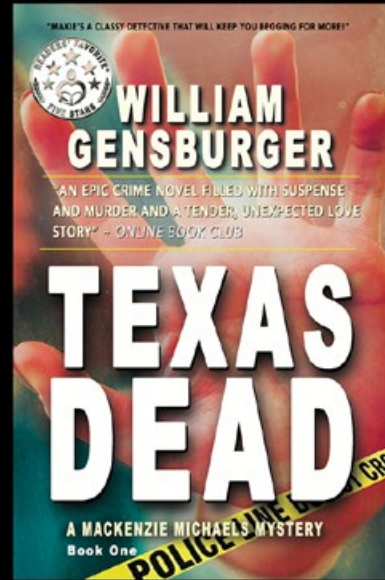
MbC: Which is why they'll look at me. And that's why Publishers Weekly has reviewed numerous of my books, and I've never had to pay for that, which a lot of Indies do. I just let everyone know I've got it, and I get a request. But if I'm Scholastic, if they want my book reviewed by Publishers Weekly, it's going to get reviewed. If they decide they need me on NPR, I'll be on NPR. So the benefit is just extended reach and a team.

WG-Now you have to hassle with somebody's



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vision of a cover.

MbC: I do my own covers. I had trouble for a while, as I tried to quit several years back to the four people I thought would care. And I immediately got all these phone calls and emails from really big authors who basically said, 'we want you to stay, not because you're the best writer that's ever been

born, but just because you're a nice person. So what can we do?' And the biggest thing that everyone said first was your cover sucks. And they did because I grew up in the Wild West days of Kindle, where you could be a learning impaired five-year-old on Microsoft Paint, and it's fine. But one of the things I did to rebrand was I literally put myself through

the most grueling two-month course on Photoshop and image manipulation and graphic design. And I've gotten recognition for the covers alone. So I'm like, "hooray," and they sell the books. And again, that's what I care about.

WG: You have a Patreon. Is it worth it?

MbC: Yeah. When these big authors reached out to me, I was really touched. My mom always tells me to be nice to people--things I learned in kindergarten. But it really hit me as I had really gone out of my way to be an enjoyable presence, and it mattered. And so is Patreon worth it? It's far from being the most lucrative thing I do, more of

a good give-back PR. I connect with people; they feel like they're supporting me because not every month is a feast. Even when you get to a certain level, the money can run out. No more is coming until next month. And you've got to deal with that. So it is helpful to have a little stop-gap. It's not like I'm a massive presence, but I respond to those fans more often. I used to email every single fan.

I stopped doing that about two years ago because it was eating up 3 hours every day. But if you're on Patreon, I'll respond to you if you're on the upper levels.

MbC: One of the things I did when Covid started and I talked to the fans I was like, 'Hey, times are really hard. So we're putting all my books on sale for \$0.99' and that I can decide to do. And that's just to get them into the hands of people who are

struggling. And we did that for over a year and a half. Patreon likes to have a tiered structure. I changed mine. Now it's just you give what you can; you get whatever is there. So if you're given \$20 a month, you get exactly the same as the \$2 a month person. And it's an honor code. I hope that people who have a little extra will kick in a little extra. You don't have to have these little subcategories because I thought that was a lot of work. Especially for an introvert. Every interaction I have costs me significant energy. So knowing that Patreon people are real supportive.

WG: You're very outgoing, though.



MbC: We have a lot of mental health issues in my family, and there's Autism Spectrum Disorder in there. And I'm not saying I'm on that spectrum at all, but I have some of the signs—my psychiatrist has been like, you're really close sometimes. And so, for example, eye contact is really hard for me. I practice. My wife says I'm off-putting sometimes because the only way I could learn to do it is I pick one of my eyes and stare at one of their eyes. So I've been looking at you with my right eye to your right eye this whole conversation. And it gives me a rule. I focus better with rules.

But when I get home from a Comic-Con, or when I go home after this interview, I'm not working. I'm going to sit and play a mindless video game for an hour to recoup. So I'm a hard introvert. But I've learned to fake it.

WG: You keep going. Push yourself.

MbC: You have to keep going. I think that's a super important thing for authors because this is a high-impact career. It's not easy. I have the job security of a crack whore.

WG: You know, that is the quote I want to use.

MbC: I'm doing something today, and I'm making money today, but tomorrow I might not be attractive anymore or whatever. My drug preference of choice may not be available. Amazon could roll over and say, we're not doing Kindle—economic times, people.

It was a big, huge deal for me when the economy shut down at the beginning of Covid. And I always tell the story because it's really a pick-me-up. Everybody kind of agrees. The world is getting scarier. It's getting harder to navigate interpersonal relationships. There's a lot of darkness out

there, but for my wife and my kids, Covid hits and everything shuts down. My fans, my feed, and people are losing jobs left and right. I'm not Stephen King, okay.

I don't have

\$100 million sitting in my pocket, but I hadn't lost my job because who would I quit to, really? My wife? She just says, 'No, you're not fired. You're working today.' But we all huddled together. I was so proud of my kids because I said, I have an idea. It's going to involve some sacrifice. We will not be doing some of the fun things we hope to do. But I want to put my books all on sale for ninety-nine cents. And the way Amazon's structure is, that meant I was taking a 90% royalty cut per book. But we did it because we wanted to help.

And we thought we'll do it for a week or two, and then rent becomes an issue, the mortgage, whatever it is. And it went on for a year and a half, and it was because everyone just saw that I cared. And I got tons of emails saying, I hate all of the kinds of books you write, but I just bought all of them today. And I'm sending some to my friends who do like this kind of stuff because they

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**I WROTE 30  
BOOKS BEFORE  
IT WAS REGULAR  
GOOD MONEY.  
I WROTE 20  
SCREENPLAYS  
BEFORE I SOLD  
ONE.**

**“  
IF YOU’RE  
DOING YOUR  
JOB AT PAGE  
ONE, THEY’VE  
FORGOTTEN  
ABOUT THE  
COVER BLURB,  
AND THEY’RE  
JUST ALL-  
IN ON YOUR  
BOOK.”**

just wanted somebody out there who wasn’t looking down and shaking their head, but looking at them going, hey, you’re awesome. And so we did that. And there’s a lot of good out there. The darkness is a blanket.

WG: How does that affect things on social media?

MbC: My dad was always my best writing teacher. The wisest thing I think he ever said to me was discussing important things on social media is like teaching rocket science with bumper stickers. And he’s right. For some reason, many of us have accepted the idea that our world needs to be communicable in sound bites. It’s not. And even as an ex-lawyer, I rarely opine on matters of law because it’s no longer my expertise.

WG: So that raises the question. Why did you quit law?

MbC: I didn’t. No. So what happened was my wife got very sick, and she had some serious, serious health issues, and I had just been made partner. I worked hard, I brought in some clients, and I didn’t screw up too often. And so they made me partner. And then my wife went downhill, and I was essentially working part-time, and I was an equity partner, so they couldn’t fire me. But they did call me into a room and say, we would like to invite you to divest yourself of your shares, which is a firing. You can’t stick around like that. It’s

going to be hell. And I don’t blame them for it. I wasn’t putting in the hours. My focus was on my wife.

But it was a rough couple of years, and that’s part of why I did this. The screenwriting was so propitious because I sold a screenplay right at that time. And that’s what got us through the next two years. And that’s also when I started writing on Kindle. I had published a book, but I had free time because I was jobless, and I wanted a job. I never wanted to be a struggling artist because my focus has always been on my family. And so, as soon as I became a struggling artist, I just tried to get out of it. But that was right around the time in California, everyone realized that lawyers are horrible, and no one wanted to hire one anymore. I was just floating around. I’m like, well, I’ll look for jobs. What I tell people is I have always lied for a living. The difference is that when you’re a writer, people enjoy paying you for it. And that’s no joke. I tried to be ethical as a lawyer, and I’m buying my soul back on an installment plan. So there you go.

WG: Any advice for new authors that have some ability?

MbC: Well, first of all, however much ability you have. Write? Nowadays, people get trapped in this marketing idea. And marketing is incredibly important, and it falls on the author more and more, whether you’re traditional or indie. But even if you’re a great marketer, you write your book, make a billion dollars, and you don’t have a second book. The pace of life is such that you will

**ALL BOOK COVERS ARE *HYPERLINKED* - CLICK THEM**

be forgotten. I wrote a dozen books before I started making any real money. I wrote 30 before it was regular good money. I wrote 20 screenplays before I sold one. So the first thing is always write.

The second thing I would tell young writers is really be kind. You cannot control whether you are the most successful, whatever that means. The success is baloney. It's the end of an ever-temporal, ever-running away rainbow. So you can't control whether you have the nicest car, the nicest house, the prettiest wife, the nicest wife, the smartest, whatever. You can't control any of that, but you can say before any interaction, I'm going to walk in there, I'm going to be professional, and I'm going to be the kindest person in the room. You'll fail at that sometimes.

Those are achievable goals, and those matter, because, again, my career was about to end. And what kept it from ending wasn't my talent. I had a baseline of talent. The people were just calling to support me. They were like, we like you, we like your kids, we like your wife. And the nice life product for a writer. If you're nice to people, they tell you everything. And I don't mean that in a creepy, weird way, but I genuinely like people. So being interested in people makes you number one, more interesting to them. And that also allows you greater depth as an author. It allows you more character options as well. Again, you're going to reach a certain threshold if you stick with it. You can't be an island. It's not a solitary process. I work far harder as a writer than I did as a partner in the law firm.

The third piece of advice to any starting writer, make sure you have a good support group. And that can be a spouse or a friend or a brother or sister or whatever. But that person has to love you enough to support you when you are failing and love you so much that they tell you when you are wrong. Yeah, that's important because most writers really want someone to tell them they're Shakespeare. And my wife, she'll say, 'this part is not working.'

WG: All right. What's the best part of the process?

MbC: Definitely writing 'The End.' Just being done. I usually have about 6 hours of 'Oh yeah!'

WG: Worst part of the process?

MbC: Everything else. I don't know that I'd say worst. Hardest for me is interacting with people because I'm an introvert. But it's not a bad thing. It's a good thing. I die without it. And I've written close to 50 books. And anyone who tells you you're not a real writer, that's a person that you don't listen to because their interest isn't really your profession. It's your self-esteem. And how dare they?

WG: This was great. Thank you for spending time with me today.

MbC: Thank you.

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# A Return to Romance

by Katherine Soriano

Nervous before a date, a young woman comes to terms with the expectations of this possible involvement.

**S**haky hands kept trying to button up the cardigan until finally they gave up and fell to my sides, leaving my dress underneath exposed. I hated it. I stood in front of the mirror, looking at my reflection with a hard stare. Noting the dark circles under my eyes, I cursed at my anxiety for keeping me up the night before. And yet no matter how sleep deprived I felt, I didn't feel too tired to continue criticizing what I saw staring back at me. I looked at my stomach. Was I bloated? Gosh, maybe I should have changed. I wasn't sure how long I was there for before a knock at the door startled me into jumping a little. Before I could answer, the door opened, revealing my mother. I wanted to greet her, but upon seeing such an excited expression on her face, I instead felt the urge to vomit from the ever present nerves.

"Are you ready?" she asked, smiling widely.

A frown made its way onto my face before I could stop it. Internally, I wanted to scold myself for such a display of emotion. Taking a deep breath, I schooled my expression back to neutral once more and nodded. She looked at my cardigan and took a step towards me to button it up. I backed away, avoiding her hands. She stilled for a second then stepped towards the door instead.

"Your date is waiting," she said, leading the way. Sparing the mirror one last glance, I followed her out.

There were many reasons why I was getting a very bad feeling about this day. Firstly, it was cold. It figures the one day I decide to accept a date invi-

tation, it would be cold. I hated the cold. It just was not comfortable. How could I possibly present my best self to a potential partner in these conditions? Secondly, the dress I was wearing did not fit me as well as I remembered.

True, it's been a while since I last wore it. True, I was basically a different person then. True, that person would not be this bothered by a dress not fitting perfectly. But I, me, myself right then thought this was the worst thing that could happen to me. Thirdly, my mother was very invested in the outcome of this meeting. This could only mean whatever happened, she was going to be disappointed.

"Here she is!" my mother voiced loudly, making me almost wince.

I made an effort to smile at the man who stood from the living room couch, but my smile definitely could have been better. I shook my head at myself mentally. This should be a happy, exciting time.

Smile. More, bigger, natural.

"Even more beautiful than the pictures you showed me," he said kindly to my mother with his eyes on me.

The desire to go back to my room and hide suddenly surged as I felt the heat rush to my cheeks. I was no longer used to such attention or compliments.

"You flatterer, you," my mother responded, winking when I didn't say anything. "Well, shall we?" he asked, offering me an arm.

I looked at his arm blankly. Sensing an upcoming pause, my mother gave me a little push. Without



having the time to think, I took his arm, and we went on our merry way.

He seemed nice enough, at least. Also nice-looking. Of course my mother would be better at picking dates than me. Gosh, was I a loser or what? I wanted to sigh, feeling the rise of self pity coming. Deep breaths. Relax. You're on a date with a nice, cute guy. This is a good thing.

*Remember. Smile.*

To my credit, once we were alone, I pushed down the prodding panic much better than I had believed myself able to. Maybe I was more ready than I thought I was. A short drive and fifteen minutes of small talk later, we found ourselves safely seated at a nice small restaurant.

"So how are you liking being back home?" he asked.

"I think it's been as good as one would expect moving back in with your parents. I did really miss them when I was away, but now that I'm back..."

I didn't think it would be appropriate to mention how much of a huge failure I thought I was for coming back home after my last breakup. Something told me the self-hate and shame I felt was not a good first date topic. I pulled the cardigan around me tighter.

"I hear you," he replied, "I can only imagine how much nicer it is being with your family after so long. My family lives a bit far, so I really don't visit as much as I should."

I made a noncommittal sound of acknowledgment. I knew my response should have been better but his assumption that being back home was a really nice thing made me squirm. I hated contradicting people. Also, I had to focus on the menu before me. The waiter could be coming back at any second to ask what we wanted, and I needed to be prepared to say something... anything.

"What do you want to eat?" he asked.

"Um, I'm not sure," I murmured, already overwhelmed by the options.

That was a lie. I actually would really love some chili cheese fries, but they tended to get a bit messy so a definite no-go for a first date.

"Hmm... I'm thinking of getting the fish and chips

myself," he supplied.

It's been a while since I've been seated in an actual restaurant. I didn't go out very often even when my last relationship was going well. That being said, my ex would never order the fish. He was picky, suspicious, skeptical. He had the habit of overthinking and questioning everything. I missed him. I grimaced at myself at the thought as it allowed more memories of the past love flood through my mind.

My date cleared his throat. I looked up with a start, realizing I hadn't said anything in response, and now there was a waiter standing in front of us, staring at me. I hadn't even heard them say anything. My date picked up on my bewildered expression.

"We're going to need a little more time," he said. The waiter

nodded and walked away.

"Sorry, I was just in my head too much... I guess," I murmured, blushing.



I realized I was frowning again. I balled my hand into a fist under the table. I could just hear my mother hissing in my ear to ask if it would kill me to smile.

"No worries! Really, take your time choosing.

**Pop. The button I was messing around with popped off my cardigan. My fingers stopped.**

We're not in a rush."

I nodded, flashing him a small smile. My eyes went back to the menu. Okay, okay. Focus. "I think I'll get a salad," I finally said.

Totally a safe choice. That'd be fine, probably. I sighed and started fidgeting with a button on my cardigan.

"Are you alright?" he asked, shooting me a concerned look.

"Yeah, totally, I'm fine. Sorry, I didn't mean to space out like that. Really, I was just distracted." "What's on your mind?"

Okay, I definitely shouldn't mention the fact I was thinking about my ex-boyfriend. I opened my mouth to let out a deep breath to calm myself down and instead, I let out a large burp. My hand immediately shot up to cover my mouth. My date looked up, surprised.

"I am so sorry, really. Oh gosh, I'm so embarrassed. This is my first date in a long time and I guess I just feel kinda nervous, and sometimes when I get really anxious, I get a little gassy... ugh, TMI. I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry about it, really," he said, waving a hand as if to dismiss what just happened.

Gosh, was he paid by my mother to be extra nice to me or something? "Tell me what's got you so nervous. Maybe that'll help," he said.

"Like I said, it's been a while. I just... I'm worried. I don't know..."

"How long has it been since your last date?" he asked, interested.

"To be honest, I haven't been

on a date since my last relationship... and that was two years ago."

"Two years, huh? Well, personally I think it's great you got some time to yourself to really move on from it. Often people just go to the next person without really processing it. So good on you for taking your time."

*Pop.* The button I was messing around with popped off my cardigan. My fingers stopped. You would certainly think that at this point I would have processed everything. That sense of failure was creeping up on me again. I felt something bubbling up my throat. My anxiety was going through the roof on this topic. I hadn't actually talked about my last relationship with anyone else outside of my family. My hand went to cover my mouth, but it was too late. To my increasing horror, it wasn't a burp that came out. It was words.

"I still love him."

"Oh..." he replied.

I saw a tint of red on his cheeks. Was he embarrassed? Flustered? Gosh, I should elaborate, right? Before I could stop myself, I explained my whole situation.

"I'd never get back together with him. I know he's horrible for me. I already wasted two years of my life just crying about the end of our toxic relationship. It's stupid, I know. My mother urged me back into the dating world, but I'm not so sure I'm ready for all this yet. Yes, there were definitely times where meeting

a partner and falling in love again was all I could think about, but now that I'm here, it's a little scary. Not that you're scary! You're great. I was seriously wondering if you were paid by my mother to be Mr. Perfect for me just a bit ago. Not that I think you're totally fake or anything or saying you're perfect! Okay what I'm trying to say, turns out, a return to romance was a bit different than I imagined it would be, totally on my side of things, not yours. I thought maybe I could get back out there, forget all about that time I wasted alone and sad, but I just can't shake it off... apparently. I admit. I'm 100% not over it. I'm so sorry. Oh my God, I'm so bad at dates."

Being quiet, burping, then blabbing about how I'm still in love with my ex! Seriously, how could I do this to myself? I wanted to disappear into this chair so no one could look at me ever again, not even to watch me walk away. Oh God, what would my mother say?

To my surprise, my date breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad you feel that way. To be honest, I just got dumped by my partner a few months ago. I wasn't really sure if I was ready for this either, but your mom can be pretty pushy."

"Oh my gosh, so pushy, right?" I replied.

He laughed. "Yeah."

A small pause.

"Sorry, I should just leave," I said. The realization of how much of a fool I've been acting was settling in the forefront of my mind.

"How about we just start over instead?"

"What? I-"

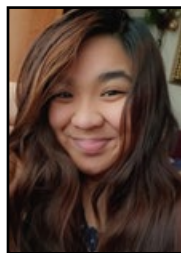
"Let's just forget all that stuff about dating, expectations, your mother, whatever. How about we just live in the moment? Frankly speaking, I think we could both just use a friend now."

I looked at him in wonder. After another small pause, a smile finally worked its way onto my face.

"Yeah... I think I like the sound of that. But... I would really love to order some chili cheese fries then."

He laughed again. I think I liked the sound of that too. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Katherine Soriano was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. She got her B.S. in Mathematics and Economics from UC San Diego. A homebody through and through, she would rather spend her time binge watching shows, playing video games, or searching the web for fan fiction. Sometimes, she will leave the comfort of her home to go to a concert, get another tattoo, or hang out with her extensive Filipino family. She has found an interest in many different creative outlets including hand knitting, diamond painting, acrylic pours, and nail art, but writing will always be her first love. She now lives with her boyfriend, dog, and cat in the 925 area.*

You can follow her on Instagram @howveryoriginal

Photo credits: <https://elements.envato.com/user/Pasanheco>

[Editor note: Katherine's story was our Short Story Contest second place winner.]

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**INTERVIEW**

# RICHARD H. STEPHENS

## Following a Dream to be a Writer

Born in Simcoe, Ontario, Richard began writing in 1974 at a young age. A circuitous route eventually led him to full-time writing at a later age, which demonstrates that passion should always be followed.

**WG: What was the book you and your friend wrote (Hardy Boys style), and what became of that manuscript?**

**RS:** The book was called, The Stobetts, The Falls that Weren't. The title of the series combined my last name, Stephens, with my best friend's last name, Corbett—the Stobetts. Thus, Paul and I became my version of Frank and Joe Hardy.

I still have the original manuscript that I wrote when I was 9. It is safely stored in a secret room that is accessed through a movable bookshelf in my home library.

**WG: As a young writer faced with having to support a child versus writing (at all), how did you reconcile to go work full time, and was there any hope of writing at any time?**

**RS:** There was little time for me to write. I left school in grade 10 to support my first child. As the sole money earner, I worked a lot of overtime. As I grew older, I had more children and two careers, so finding time to write was difficult.

**WG: Looking back, do you wish you'd done it differently?**

**RS:** Absolutely. I should have found more time for myself to write, but who knows what my books would look like today? Everything works out for a reason, so perhaps this was the best way for me.

**WG: What is the best part of the process for you? Worst part?**

**RS:** As a writer who doesn't plot, (I always know the ending of a series, but I never know how I'm going to get there), the best part about writing is that I get to discover the story just as my readers do. When my characters decide to do bizarre things, I'm as shocked as anyone reading along.

Being independently published, the worst part of the writing business is marketing and promoting my books. I don't enjoy doing it, and I never will. Fortunately, I have the luxury of someone who takes over this part for me—my wife, Caroline.

**WG: What's your writing routine look like.**

**RS:** I write from Monday to Friday. I get up early every morning and am in my home office by 8. I look after social media and emails for the first part of the morning and then set into editing what I wrote on the previous writing day. That usually takes me to lunchtime. In the afternoon, I sit down to write for a few hours. If I get 2,000 to 2,500 words written, that's a good day for me.

**WG: Do you get negative criticism, and if so, how do you deal with it?**



**RS:** Being a writer can be a lonely occupation, especially between book releases. As a creator, negative criticism is like a slap in the face. It stings, but just like the slap, it goes away. Fortunately, I have enough amazing fans that have an uncanny knack for lifting me up whenever something brings me down. For that, I will always be grateful.

**WG: What was the impact of reading Stephen R. Donaldson and Terry Brooks?**

**RS:** Their impact was powerful and life-changing. They instilled in me my love of reading fantasy, and then, a few years later, my love of writing it as well.

**WG: Why did you go back to finish high school?**

**RS:** As much as I appreciated my job as a shipper at Weston's Bakery, I had always aspired to do something more.

Back when I was growing up, to think that I could actually publish a book was nothing more than a fantasy.

In my 30's, I went back to school to get my high school diploma. I grew up wanting to be a police officer, but I am legally blind in one eye, so I could never pass the physical.

When I was 38, however, I found out that I could become a special constable and work in the court systems. The major difference in our roles is that I wasn't on the road at all hours of the day and night. Instead, I worked Monday to Friday during the day, dealing with the many hard-nosed criminals who entered the justice system.

**WG: What prompted you to resign from the police force?**

**RS:** I'm not a big and tough guy. Nor do I have

the Alpha personality that is so often required to deal with the 5% of the population that we encounter. The stress of handling hardened criminals day in and day out wore on me. It was only a matter of time before my health suffered as a result. Realizing that, my wonderful wife and I decided it was time to leave the police service and allow me to realize my fantasy and write full-time.

**WG: 33 years, two jobs/careers. Was the plan always to return to writing?**

**RS:** Not until that fateful day my wife and I concluded that my job in the police service was detrimental to my mental and physical health. Sure, deep inside, I always wanted to become a full-time writer, but never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that would become a reality, but here I am.

**WG: Any advice to new writers?**

**RS:** Believe in yourself. Don't try to be Stephen King, J.K. Rowling, or Terry Brooks. The world already has those amazing authors. What

the world doesn't have is you.

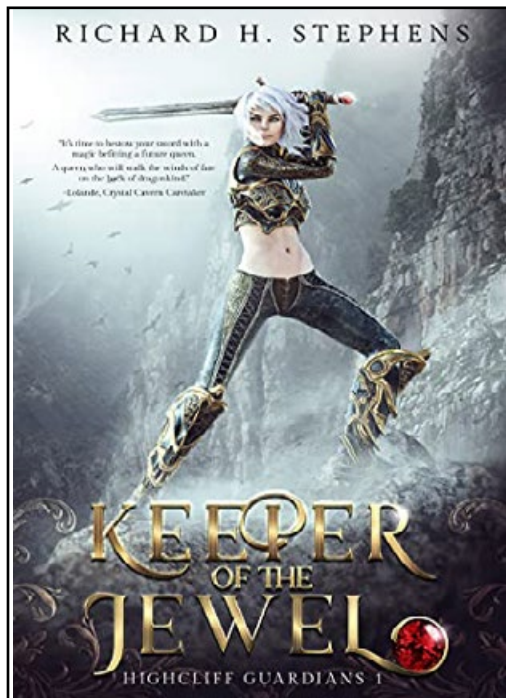
**WG: Anything else you would like to mention?**

**RS:** Along with Christie Stratos and David M. Kelly, I cohost a Live Video-cast. 'Lurking for Legends' airs live every Tuesday night at 8 PM EST.

Our broadcast is primarily designed to give back to the writing community that has been so instrumental in helping us achieve our own goals. We livestream to Facebook, YouTube, and Twitch TV.

My favorite part of the show is the monthly Live Read, in which we invite fellow authors to read excerpts from their stories for our audience. It's so much fun. Here is the link to view our latest Live





Read: [HERE](#).

Be sure to watch well into the middle (around the 38 minute mark). Things get a little crazy!

I would also like to announce the upcoming re-release of my next book in the Soul Forge Universe. Windwalker is set to release this summer! ■

Follow Richard on his social media links:

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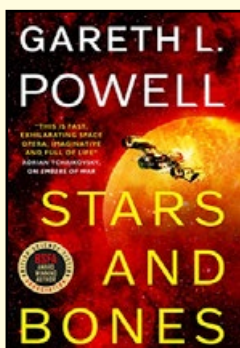
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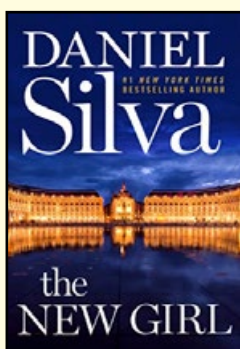
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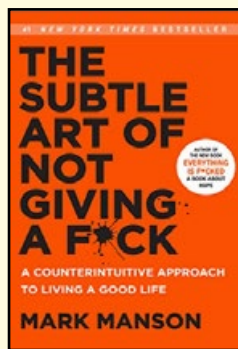
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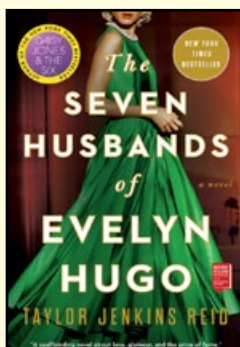
At an exclusive private school in Switzerland, mystery surrounds the identity of the beautiful raven-haired girl who arrives each morning in a motorcade fit for a head of state. Her father is Khalid bin Mohammed, a much-maligned crown prince of Saudi Arabia. He is now reviled for his role in the murder 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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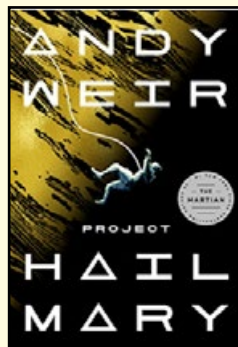
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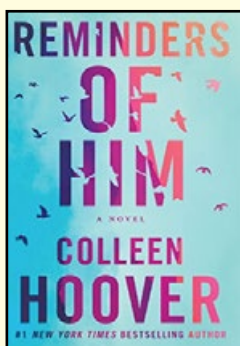
Regardless of why Evelyn has selected her to write her biography, Monique is determined to use this opportunity to jumpstart her career.

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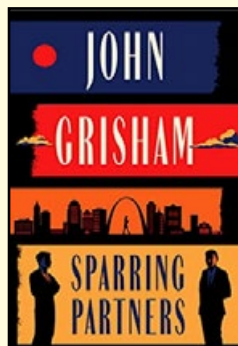
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## TALES FROM THE SCRIPT

Observations and Opinions on Screenwriting by script doctor  
LANCE THOMPSON | [scriptdoc88@gmail.com](mailto:scriptdoc88@gmail.com)

### “It’s the Economy, Stupid.”

This phrase is credited to James Carville, advisor to Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign in 1992, to emphasize that the electorate was most interested in personal financial issues. But the economy is also important to the screenwriter.

If we can cut three scenes down to one, let two characters do the work of five, trim a paragraph of description from a page or shave a few words off a line of dialogue, we save the production time and money.

One of my favorite examples of this is in the David Seidler-written “The King’s Speech.” The Prince of Wales is reminded by his younger brother, the Duke of York, that he is late for dinner. The older prince takes a clock off the mantel and resets it half an hour, telling his brother that all clocks in the house run fast.

This minor action artfully sketches the character in a few seconds. We realize the Prince of Wales does not mind keeping other royal family members waiting, including the Queen. His own time is more important. Moreover, he changes the time to suit his schedule. This is an analogy for his personal situation. He is in love with an American divorcee and wants to marry her, which is forbidden for a prince about to assume the throne. The Prince of Wales insists that the rules change to accommodate him. This is an effective and economical character sketch that enriches our

understanding of the character.

My writing professor at UCLA, Richard Walter, had another favorite character sketch that takes only a few seconds. In the Richard Tuggle-written “Escape From Alcatraz,” a fellow inmate asks Frank Morris (played by Clint Eastwood) what kind of childhood he had. Morris replies with one word: “Short.”

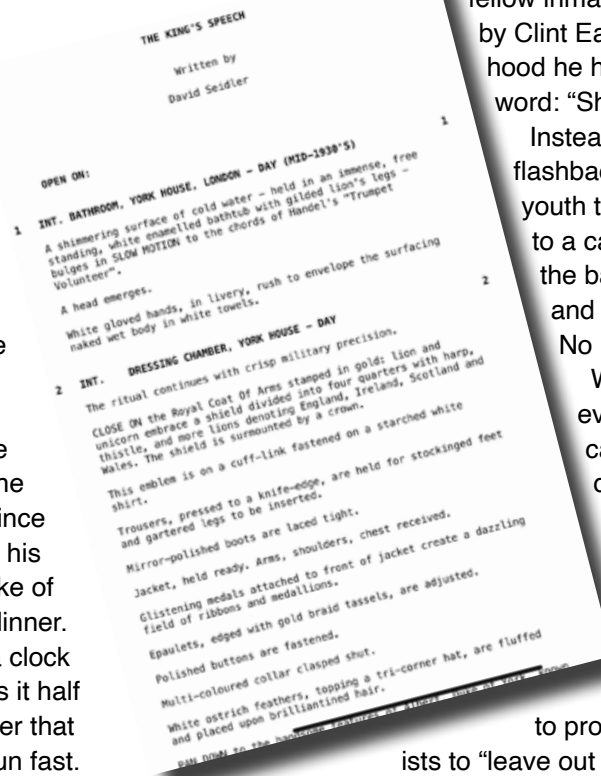
Instead of a long dialogue scene or flashbacks about the events in Morris’ youth that hardened him and led him to a career in crime, we are given the bare minimum of information and allowed to imagine the details. No more is necessary.

When writing for the screen, every second is precious because every second of production can cost thousands or tens of thousands of dollars. Making your screenplay as brief and succinct as possible will make it more interesting and valuable.

Elmore Leonard, in advice to prose writers, encourages novelists to “leave out the part that readers tend to skip.” This is even more vital for the screenwriter.

Write your scripts with economy and reap the economic rewards.

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**SHORT STORY**

# The Awakening

by Daniel Jackson

A young man fantasizes about the perfect image of the woman he wants to be involved with.

It's strange. Her hair seems to be glowing today as if it's bathing in the sun. But as I look around, I see that these windows are painted with raindrops. Her brunette tresses are aggressively drawn back into a highly tensioned ponytail. Usually, they're down, dangling over the left side of her face, acting as her own stage curtain. Something to hide behind while she pokes her head out through the cracks, watching the crowd as they wait for her. Raising the anticipation. Holding the power backstage to decide whether the show will go on. But finally, the wait has ended. The curtain has risen, and she's emerged. Ready to take center stage and give the audience a bow. I imagine myself standing from my seat, clapping hard, and throwing flowers at her feet as her hair shines in the spotlight.

However, this production does not take place on the creaky floorboards of a theater stage. It's set in the distant lands of the booth at the other end of this café. And I'm the only audience member, scribbling away in my notebook like a theater critic. In this current act, she's fiercely focused on her laptop, leaning so far forward as she types that I worry she might just fall into her screen. Every few minutes, she pauses. Her eyes levitate over her computer and find their way to me. My eyes desperately vault themselves away in a valiant effort to pretend that I haven't been staring. But she knows. She'll smile, subtly basking in the attention before letting her focus settle back to her work. I'll close my eyes and listen to the symphonic clacking of

her keyboard. I like to think that she's writing about me too.

I wonder what she would write about. Has she noticed this journal I've been writing in, bound in flexible fake leather, with the image of a key etched on the cover? How when I open it, I have to flip through a hundred full pages before reaching the first blank one. Would she notice my clothes? This gray polo, tucked into khakis, separated by a slick black belt. Would she appreciate how well I've manicured my blonde beard or how my biceps slightly bulge out the sleeves on this shirt? I think she's filling her own book with thoughts and observations about me. Just as I've done with her. If I searched through the pages of her field notes, what would I find? And how could I ever let her read through mine?

Staring at my journal, my mind drifts back to our first encounter. There was me, hovering near the register, waiting to place my order. Her standing in line just behind. The barista sauntering toward me and asking, "What can I get you today?"

Leaning in, burdened by my immense secret, the lowly whispered words slid out between the gaps in my teeth, "Large pumpkin spiced latte, please."

The barista, attracting the attention of the entire café, loudly responding with a distinct and impossible not to hear, "What?!"

With a father's sternness so as not to be misunderstood again, the order is repeated through a clenched jaw. "Large. Pumpkin. Spiced. Latte. Please." The words finally stick their landing as the

barista nods and ventures off to create my beverage.

Then, upon retreating from the register, finding myself standing before her. A devious smirk was already tattooed on her face, evidence that my secret love of pumpkin-spiced lattes had been uncovered.

The words dance from her mouth as she playfully asks, "Is that drink for your girlfriend?" My mouth falling open slightly. Lips curling into a mortified smile. Her soft laughter bounces off the counter top as she continues, "Aw. I'm sorry. I can't help myself sometimes."

Composing myself and responding with a theatrical authority, "Don't apologize. I knew the risks when I started drinking these."

Her leaning in closer, whispering, "Well, your secret is safe with me."

"Good. Otherwise...you know..." I whispered back, slowly running my pointed finger across my neck.

Her winking at me, finding it humorous and holding her finger up to her lips in a mutually agreed upon eternal silence.

Her laughter gone but somehow still echoing within. Me, sliding away from her towards the other

end of the counter as I wait for my latte, respecting such a professional gutting of my ego.

Her, ordering her tea, smirking at me as it's handed right back, and then gliding off to her booth.

Me charmed, embarrassed, and intrigued all at once as unfamiliar feelings expand from my stomach.

That scene unfolded over a month ago, and I've considered that soft laughter as her signature. Her name on the lease as a new tenant, taking up residence within the confines of my mind. I just wish I had the guts to knock on her door already. Tell her things about myself, deeper than what she sees at

such a great distance. Like my love of chess and how therapeutic I find the noise that those felt-bottomed pieces make as they slide across the board. Or how sometimes, when I write in this journal, I'll lose myself in introspection to the point an entire afternoon will pass before me. Maybe I'd even tell her how I grew up going to magic camp and still performing tricks for my younger cousins. I see that she wants to know these things. She wants the knock to come. She's just waiting as I pace the hallways outside her door.

I see her in here twice a week, and there are always subtle interactions between us, hidden



behind blushed cheeks and fluttering stomachs. There's something about how she just now raised her mug up to her mouth, pursed her lips, and lightly blew on her peppermint tea that's making me lose my mind. She did that on purpose. Knowing I would see it. Knowing it stokes the coals inside me. Clever girl. This fire in my gut now burns with certainty. Certain that I need to take the next step.

Yet, I'm finding it unsettling to trust this confidence. I keep thinking about how easily I could lose control of the situation. But that's just part of the game. If I want her, I must work for it. I've been hiding among these written words, squeezed between

the lines on these pages for too long. Orchestrating the situation to my pitch. My tempo. My volume. No one to question me as I wave my baton before the band, controlling when and where to hit the proper notes. But within this ensemble, all she is, is simply what I'm writing her character to be. She can't hurt me in my writing. I can maintain control here. She can't get away from me on the page. Is that where I want this opportunity to live and die though, on the pages of this journal?

No. She is the first step towards the future you want. Become the new version of yourself that you've envisioned. You should not fear such a challenge as this. Leap from the page and take your first steps outside of this world of graphite and paper. Allow yourself to be scared. Give yourself permission to fail and finally surrender to the awakening of your true self. And do it fast. It looks like she's walking over here...

I need to write this down, so I won't forget.

By the time I put my pencil down, she was here, looking down at me. Raising her white flag in friendly surrender, she asked, "What in the world are you waiting for? Do you realize how patient I've been?"

I relaxed back in my chair and simply replied, "I just wanted to build some anticipation."

She pulled her head back, cracking a smile, and raised her eyebrows. "Oh. I see. Well, here I am; you've got my attention."

"Ah yes, my evil plan is working," I said through a grin, bringing my palms together and wrapping my fingers against each other.

She chuckled and continued, "Am I crazy to think that I'm the only one feeling this way? I've been watching you, watching me, you know."

My smile settled, and my eyes softened, falling to the floor for a moment, then rising back up to meet hers. I replied, "No. You're not the crazy one. Honestly, there was this part of me that was hesitant. I guess I was just afraid of what would happen if I asked you out."

She brought her hand to the back of her head, fumbling with the elastic tie in her ponytail until her hair fell to its normal resting place.

Then she leaned in close, placed a folded-up piece of paper on the table before me and whispered, "Well, if you had, then the worst thing that could have happened was this."

Her eyes pointed towards the note as she rose, waiting for me to open it. My pupils must have reflected fireworks when I saw her phone number carved into the paper.

She backed away slowly, hiding behind her hair. Conjuring that anticipation once again, she said, "I'm Tara. Call me."

And then she was gone. And since, it's been me sitting here in a silent triumph, my heartbeat ringing through the café, while the note she left somehow grows in weight, causing the legs of this coffee table to groan.

I've lost myself within this string of digits as that fire in my gut spreads throughout my entire body. The hesitation I felt is subsiding as if it were a balloon finally released to float off into the clouds. There's this inertia to it all. A small rock dislodged, surely to create an avalanche. I will overcome any lingering fear and finally commit myself to achieve what I've wanted to since I first met Tara. I'll follow the plan.

I'll put this note in my pocket. I'll walk home, leave it in my living room drawer, and wait two days before pulling it back out. Then I'll dial the number and ask her to accompany me to dinner and a movie. I'll be polite, gentlemanly, and attentive. I'll listen. I'll laugh. I'll brush the hair out of her face. I'll open myself up to her. And as the night winds down, I'll invite her up to my apartment for tea. I'll show her my favorite chess board. The dumbbells I work out with and, of course, my magic kit. Full of trick cards, wands that transform into flowers, handcuffs, and hats with secret compartments. I'll ask for her to participate in a new trick. I'll don my magic top hat and kindly ask her to put her hands behind her back. I'll handcuff them. I'll tap my wand on her head three times. Then I'll remove my hat, reach down deep inside, and retrieve a large plastic bag. I'll put it over her head and tighten the bottom around her neck with a zip tie. I'll sit down and watch as she suffocates, pondering this

insatiable appetite raging inside of me. And I'll continue wondering how it awoke from something as insignificant as being laughed at for ordering a pumpkin-spiced latte.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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

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[Editor note: Daniel's story was our Short Story Contest first place winner.]

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# THE **BIG** SCREEN

movie review by **william gensburger**

## Top Gun:Maverick

**NO SPOILERS:** (not an aircraft joke)



First, sequels usually disappoint. Second, Top Gun was originally released in 1986 with a twenty-fourish Tom Cruise, before he yielded much star power. While it was great back then, rewatching it now made it seem a bit campy and outdated.

Flash forward 36 years and we have a rarity; a sequel that is excellent and vastly superior to the original.

Where to start. Tom Cruise was 59 when he made this film--produced and starring in. Cruise does not look 59; far younger, not just in facial appearance but in his endless physicality. Every Tom Cruise film is an exhausting physical experience leaving the viewer with wonder at whatever regimen he uses. And honestly, send it my way.

Jennifer Connelly dazzles in this film as an old flame abandoned by Cruise's Lt. Pete 'Maverick' Mitchell, mentioned in the original as one line that refers her by name. Now, a single mother of a teen, she's runs the bar at TopGun.

**I don't want to give you a synopsis of the**

**film** because frankly, it's an experience you want untainted. Go and be surprised. Remember when you'd go to a movie and just be delighted? This one will delight you. There are many scenes that touch back to the original story and you'll thank me for not mentioning any of them.

I will say that the cast had to learn the F18 for authentic flight scenes and that included high-G moves after launching off an aircraft carrier. Cruise insists on authenticity and wherever possible does his own stunts to the degree that he often is injured—broken foot while filming the last Mission Impossible movie jumping across rooftops. Again, I'd like his list of vitamins and supplements, and whatever magic juice they might add to it because I'm a few years older than him and his movies make me want to take a nap.

Val Kilmer (Iceman) from the original is in this movie in a way that is fitting for the actor reprising his role, and the scenes are both poignant and even with some brevity.

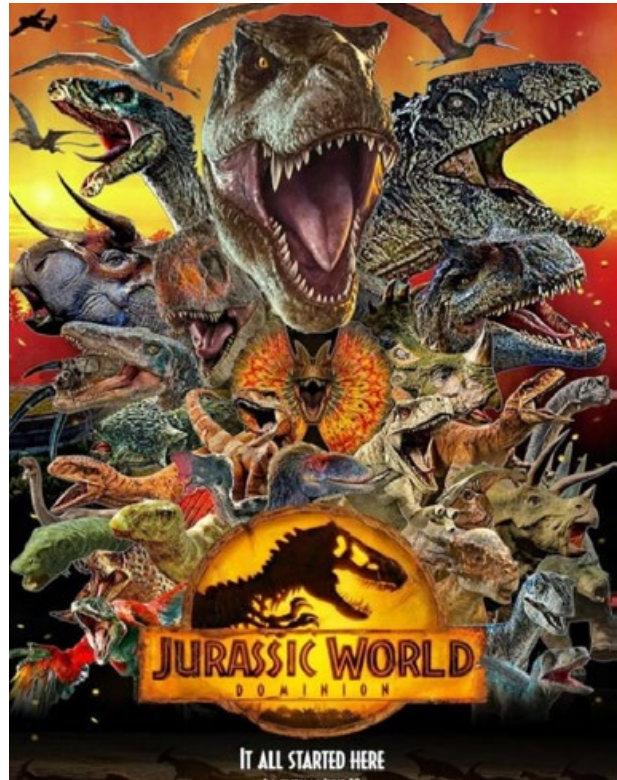
Ed Harris, an actor I enjoy, who could also use some Tom juice, plays Cain, cranky, stubborn, but allows Maverick to step up on what is considered a suicide mission.

The dogfights are superb. Shot in a way that draws you in as a participant more than an observer. The story rich with twists and turns that keep you on the edge until it's over and you find yourself wanting more.

I do suggest seeing it on a big screen theatre-which means checking your Online seat booking for the auditorium with a large screen as many have smaller sized screens. It's worth it. Or see it in IMAX.

Cast: Tom Cruise · Miles Teller · Jennifer Connelly · Val Kilmer · Bashir Salahuddin · Jon Hamm · Charles Parnell · Monica Barbaro

## Jurassic World: Dominion



When last we left Owen Grady (Chris Pratt), Claire (Bryce Dallas Howard), along with two new friends, they had managed to thwart Eli Millis' (Rafe Spall) plans to sell off the dinosaurs rescued from the volcanic extinction at Isla Nubla, instead of moving them to a sanctuary. They found Benjamin Lockwood's niece, Maisie (Isabella Sermon) was actually a clone of his dead daughter, and with information gleaned from her, managed to stop some of the sale, including Blue, the velociraptor that Owen had raised and communicates with.

Jurassic World: Dominion continues four years later as dinosaurs that escaped are wreaking havoc in the human world. Hiding out with Maisie, in a remote part of the Sierra Nevada mountains, acting as surrogate parents, Claire and Owen are trying to protect her from those who want her DNA

**Continued on page 40**



# William Gensburger's Writing <sup>with</sup> Class

## Writing with Instinct

How your sentence structure should change with your emotions

**M**any people assume that writing is simply an exercise. Sit down, grab paper and pen, or word processing device, come up with an idea et voila--InstaHit!

There's an old saying that writing is 1% inspiration, and 99% perspiration. Simply put, it's one helluva lot of work to write something completely, well-written, and worthy of your reader's time.

The ability to write fast, or voluminously is not a guarantee that what you write is any good. While it is certainly an achievement to write a lot, there is more to writing well.

Let me give you an example. You listen to music. A selection you like. You close your eyes and fall into the music. Now you are no longer just listening; you are immersed emotionally. You notice nuances; guitar licks, slight turn of a musical phrase and how well it works.

When you write, the same thing needs to happen. You write it out. You read it back. But you are reading it as a writer cum editor. You are not reading it as a reader. Readers reviewing books they love almost always talk about the flow, how the story grabbed them, how the characters spoke to them, how it felt like being on a ride with the author. These sentiments transcend the piece being just 'good writing.' It passes into an area that is seldom taught, a skill that you acquire only when you read a lot-not just your writing, but lots of different works.

It is. variation of the skill of reading.

You can always tell an advanced reader from the rest. These readers will tell you that quite early into the book they stopped reading and began watching the story unfold. A fluent reader has the ability to transform, subconsciously, the words into imagery.

This, by the way, is one huge failure of the public school system. They stopped requiring book reports, which meant they stopped teaching the skill of reading. All the new publisher curriculum offer snippets and excerpts, only.

When you are finished writing the structure of the story, and put the draft away for a time so it is fresher when you reread it, you are now able to come back and

study it for flow, feel, fluency.

Your writing style, which will take some time to fully develop, is not clouding it. What you must do is read it as though you were watching it as a film. Ask questions like: How can I make this part jump out? What can my character do or say that I need to adjust.

Let's play with a sentence and see what we can do.

**Margot walked into the living room and sat in the chair by the window overlooking the ocean.**





*[I know nothing of Margot, the scene, why she is there, what she looks like, where we are and so on. Let me expand on this.]*

She hadn't bothered to put on makeup. With her left hand across her chest, Margot shuffled into the living room, pausing only to catch her breath, her hand now against the stone counters she loved, as though somehow the weight might be lifted from her.

With a breath she let go and moved forward, around the oak table behind the couch, and toward the huge bay windows overlooking the ocean.

Pulling back the velvet work chair she often used, she sat down allowing her weight to spill over the sides.

The cresting waves caught her attention and for a moment she was distracted from what was both-ering her as she followed the swells, rising ever higher toward the shore before cresting and breaking, a line of white froth marking the boundary.

*[Not only have I increased the word count, I have included lots of information about Margot and where she is. We know she is a larger person, has something that is also weighing her down. And while we do not have a lot of details, we do have a picture. I could now add some other elements that allow the reader to feel emotions.]*

It had only been a month since the funeral. She could still hear his laughter. A larger wave crashed,

and she stared into it. The green and blue hues of the swirling water blended with images of him on the beach, his small body erratically running from the waves as they approached, skittish like a cat, one moment walking slowly then suddenly leaping into the air to dodge the incoming water. His skin was tanned, specks of sand stuck to the fine hairs across his chest and shoulders. His wet brown hair was all over the place, also with sand stuck to it.

"Look," he shouted at her. "Look what I found." He was holding up a starfish shell, its rigid five limbs perfectly intact.

"That's nice," she shouted back. "Eric, be careful," but he had already run off away from her.

From the chair she let out a deep sigh. She wanted to be with him. He was too young to be taken from me, she silently screamed out. There was nothing left for her now. She could go out on the balcony and take the wrought iron spiral stairs to the beach below. From there it would be a handful of short steps to the waters edge. She knew she would not wait for the tide to come in; she would stride out into the water, push herself slowly closer to the waves. She could feel the pull of the tide wanting to drag her farther out. If she stopped fighting it would easily take her. She could hold her breath until she was past the hope of any rescue. By then, she knew, the tide would have pulled her far enough away that it would all end quickly. Eric, she thought, are you waiting for mummy?"

You now have a full picture of Margot. Did you

feel the story as you progressed toward the end?  
Are you wanting more?

When you revisit your writing ask yourself how you could amplify the emotional aspects of how you are telling the story.

Let me know how it goes.



William Gensburger

*Photo credit: <https://elements.envato.com/user/AboutImages>*

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## Jurassic...Continued from page 37

to code into the dinosaurs. Blue shows up with an asexually created baby, an identical replica of her that Maisie names Beta. When both Maisie and Beta are kidnapped they must try and rescue her.

Meantime, Ellie Sadler (Laura Dern) recruits Alan Grant (Sam Neill) to go with her to stop a plague of giant locusts threatening the world's food supply. She has information that they come from a secret lab, Biosyn Genetics. That information has come to her from Ian Malcom (Jeff Goldblum), lecturing on Chaos Theory at the lab.

We meet a new character, Kayla Watts (Dewanda Wise), a pilot Owen and Claire need to reach the secret Biosyn location. She's a strong character that offers much needed help.

Without spoiling the plot, our heroes must get in the lab, destroy the locusts, rescue Maisie and Blue and survive repeated attempts on their lives, all while eluding a host of dinosaurs that want to eat them. We learn some truths about Maisie that alters what she knew, and the relationship between Alan and Ellie takes a turn.

Dr. Henry Wu (BD Wong) responsible for the locusts, the dinosaurs, and all the evil it produces, seems now remorseful of his work and the consequences of it. Remember he always comes up with ever-bigger dinosaurs. In *Fallen Kingdom* it was the Indoraptor. Before that it was the Indominus Rex. This time it's the Triandtopthisasaurus—I obviously made that up—Gigantosaurus—not kidding—that existed before, and poses the biggest danger due to its intelligence, as well as size, bred to be the perfect killer.

I won't reveal any secrets other than to say, remember this is a multi-million dollar franchise, so don't expect an ending that wraps it up, but I will say it is a bumpy (future theme-park) ride.

I like the characters. Chris Pratt is in many films these days. Bryce Dallas Howard (did you know she's Opie's daughter (director Ron Howard on the old Andy Griffith show?) also has a good screen presence, was the blind girl in *M. Night Shyamalan's 'The Village,'* and directs shows like *'The Mandalorian,'* and *'The Book of Boba Fett.'* *Jurassic Park* was released in 1993, 39 years ago, a similar age bracket with the also released *Top Gun: Maverick*. While Alan Grant and Ellie Sattler have similarly aged, both have a solid screen presence, and bring a comfort level to this film. Jeff Goldblum seems to improve with age. Perhaps that has something to do with the chaos theory espoused by his character.

Would large dinosaurs both eating little human stick figures or would it be more energy expended catching them than the caloric benefit of eating them remains one of many unanswered questions. The public appetite for this franchise seems endless. No doubt there will be more films in the future, although rumor is the original casts are now done. But as they say in Hollywood, "Never say never."

If you've enjoyed the franchise up to now, you'll enjoy this one.

Directed and written by Colin Trevorrow (*Jurassic World*, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, *Star Wars: Rise of Skywalker*).





**BOOKENDS**  
by *Jill Hedgecock*

AUTHOR: 'Between Shadow's Eyes' and 'Rhino in the Room'  
[www.jillhedgecock.com](http://www.jillhedgecock.com)

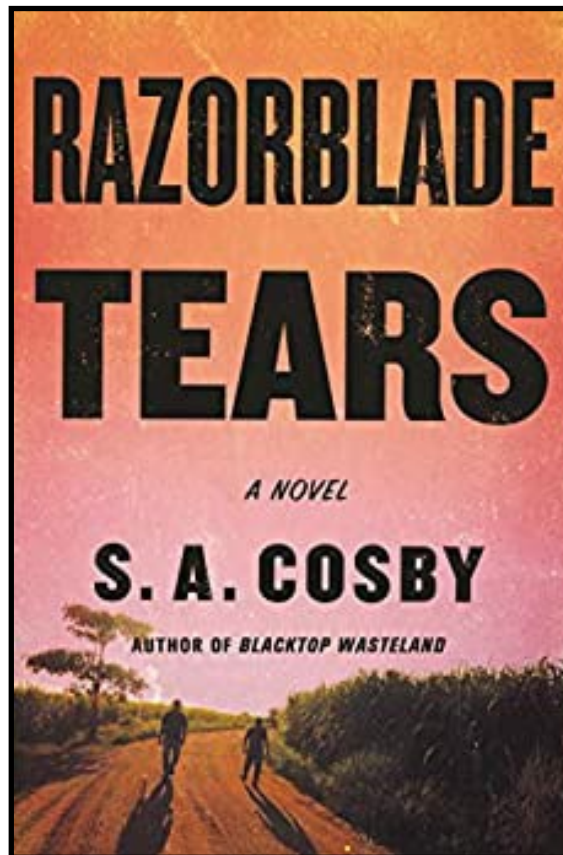
# 'Razorblade Tears' by S.A. Cosby

**Razorblade Tears** (Flatiron Books, 2021, hardcover, 336 pages \$13.49) by S. A. Cosby is the gritty and often gut-wrenching saga of two bereaved fathers, Ike Randolph and Buddy Lee. Randolph is a Black man with a violent temper. But after serving a fifteen-year prison sentence, Ike has learned to suppress his demons and now owns a successful landscaping business. But his life changes when his gay son, Isiah, is murdered along with his married partner, the white son, Derek, of another ex-con, Buddy Lee. Buddy Lee is a man with nothing to lose. Lee lives in a trailer park and his best and only friend and constant companion is a bottle of hard liquor. He's also grappling with deep regret over his inability to accept his son's gay lifestyle before Derek died.

Determined to stay out of trouble, Ike initially refuses to become a vigilante when Buddy Lee approaches him with the idea of trying to solve the brutal murder of their sons. But when police investigators fail to identify any suspects, and after Isiah's and Derek's gravestones are vandalized, Ike can no longer accept that no one will be held accountable for his son's death. His decision to join forces with Buddy Lee steamrolls them down a road of

retribution.

Set in Richmond, Virginia, **Razorblade Tears** tackles racism, sometimes subtly and sometimes head-



on. In one poignant scene, Buddy Lee says he'd switch lives with Ike if he could have Randolph's fancy truck. Ike spirals into a lecture about how Buddy Lee's life will change if the color of his skin is black. At the end of the diatribe, Randolph asks Buddy Lee if he still wants the truck

and Buddy Lee is silent. Cosby doesn't shy away from exposing homophobic prejudice either. He seamlessly slides these teachable moments into an action-packed drama spotlighting the dark underworld of power and greed.

At its heart, **Razorblade Tears** is the story of two dads estranged from their sons because of the lifestyle they chose only discovering in death what they missed out on because of their own prejudices. The nonstop action will keep readers turning the page, but it is the raw emotional regret these two parents feel that lingered with me long after completing the book.

**Razorblade Tears** was an Instant New York Times Bestseller, a New York Times Notable Book, a Goodreads Choice Award Nominee, and a Book of the Month's Book of the Year Finalist.

TIME Magazine ranked it in its 100 Must-Read Books of 2021. NPR listed it as a Best Book of 2021, and The Washington Post considered it one of the Best Thriller and Mystery Books of the Year.

Fans of Angie Thomas' [Concrete Rose](#), Paula McLain's [When the Stars Go Dark](#) and Julia Heaberlin's [We Are All the Same in the Dark](#) will probably enjoy the novel. **Razorblade Tears** is not for readers with a low tolerance for violence, but for those that enjoy a dark, twisty ride, this book will not disappoint. I loved it!

S.A. Cosby is a New York Times national best-selling author from Southeastern Virginia. Cosby has published two other crime novels: [My Darkest Prayer](#) and [Blacktop Wasteland](#). His short fiction has appeared in many anthologies and magazines and his short story, "The Grass Beneath My Feet", won the Anthony Award for Best Short Story in 2019. When not writing, he works at a funeral home, sometimes driving a hearse. Cosby is also an avid hiker and chess player.

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# A Wait for Fall

by Otto Alexander

Robert came back in the fall. He had hoped to make it by spring, but by March it was too hot and the hospital told him to wait. Besides, he had grown tired of the fighting; they'd kept telling him things weren't ready, so after a while he just believed it.

Jenny worked that house into a bright sheen once she knew he was coming. She was awfully proud of it and her mother had said it was very clean. She had put the toys and the cot in the living room to make a playroom for Henry. They could take the other room; it had a nice view of the park.

She kept everything as neat as she could. When she knew that the assessors were coming, Henry went out for the day with her mother. She cleaned the house again and got rid of all the toys from the living room. She figured they would stay clear of looking under the beds.

When Jenny opened the door she thought they looked like they were going to sell her something. The man had a jacket across his shoulders and wore a linen scarf that reeked of money. The woman did most of the talking. She was a barrage of questions. Jenny had tried to cover the hole in her jumper but she caught the woman looking. She took it off and folded it neatly over her lap. The woman asked a lot of questions about Henry. Jenny squeezed her hands together under the jumper.

'How old is Henry?'

'Eighteen months.'

'And how much time do you spend with him?'

Jenny thought it was a rotten thing to ask. She knew what they were getting at. She'd play it safe. 'I couldn't say. No more or less than you'd expect, I suppose.'

'I'm not sure what I should expect.'

'Well, I get him up. I feed him. He goes to nursery for most of the day. When he comes home he's quite tired, so I feed him again and then it's bed.'

'No playing?'

'Of course I play with him. What kind of question is that?'

Jenny knew she shouldn't have said it like that. She watched the woman write something down and look up and smile nicely at her.

'I'm just trying to understand how you spend your time with him.'

'But this is about Robert, isn't it?'

'It's about working out what you need.'

'Why don't you just tell me then. You've seen him in the hospital. You know what he needs.'

The man came back and sat down on the sofa. 'It's cozy.' He smiled at Jenny again. It was a nice smile.

'It's warm in the winter,' said Jenny. She had tears in her eyes.

The man turned to the woman. 'No draft.'

'What's that mean?' said Jenny.

'You need a through-draft to keep the air clean.'

'I'll get a fan then.'

'No, not like that.'

'How then?'

'You need an air conditioning unit; the air needs to circulate.'

'And I suppose that's another thing you won't pay for?'

The woman sat forward and touched Jenny's knee. 'Look, your house is very nice, but he'll need space for all the equipment. It won't be easy for Henry.'

Jenny's neck prickled. She pinched her hand to stop herself from crying. 'And not living with his father will be? I'll get the stupid air conditioner. My parents can pay.' Jenny's throat felt sore. She was holding a lot in.

'What are your parents' names again?'

'What's that to you?'

The woman smiled kindly and stood up. 'We'll let you know what you have to do, don't worry.'

'When?'

'In a couple of weeks.'

Jenny stayed sitting when they left. It wasn't going to make any difference if she was polite or not. She hated them.

~

Robert had taken to sleeping with a sheet over his head. It's not as peculiar as it sounds. Hospitals are noisy places and it can be difficult to sleep. He had pulled it over his head by accident some days after he came in. The nurses made an awful racket about it; came busting in and tore the sheet right off him. They told him that he had to sleep with his head above the sheets, but it sounded made up. Only one of the nurses had said it; the others stood back and looked at the floor. Robert nodded and pulled the sheet back over his head. They took to closing his door after that. One of the orderlies said they were worried others would start sleeping the same way.

For the first few weeks Robert had to lie flat with his legs held up and it made him feel breathless. He was lifted out of the bed once a day to have his dressings changed. The nurses didn't speak much. They had nice smiles and they would make sure that he felt very comfortable and it would be over with quickly. All the same, Robert was pleased that Jenny was at home.

When he was moved to the physio ward things got better for him. They worked him hard. The first month he had to learn how to sit up again. He had to squeeze his stomach muscles really tight and just hold it for as long as he could. Once he had done that, they gave him what they called a turntable. He would plant his feet on a gray disc like board and hold onto the frame. He'd hold himself upright for as long as he could, and try it again without holding anything. By the end of the first month he could hold himself upright for a few seconds, minutes if he allowed himself to grip the frame.

~

Jenny came alone during his second month of

physio. Robert didn't blame her for leaving Henry behind. They'd agreed it was better that way, but really it wouldn't have mattered. Henry would have liked it all the same.

'Well done, Bob.'

Jenny walked around in front and smiled. All her hair was loose and it fell around her shoulders. The physio nurses got up and left without saying anything. Jenny pulled a face and Robert laughed and Jenny laughed too after she saw him. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and sat next to him.

'I've missed you, Robbie.'

Robert angled himself forward onto the metal bar of the turntable. 'I've missed you both like hell.'

'Henry says, I love you, Daddy.' Jenny did a voice for Henry and handed Robert a piece of paper with a handprint on it.

'Has he grown?'

'Maybe an inch.' Jenny showed him how small with her thumb and forefinger. 'My parents have moved in.'

'Good.'

'They are going to take it in turns with your mother. He's being spoiled rotten.'

'I miss him.'

'He misses you too. He talks about you.'

Jenny leaned in and kissed his cheek. Robert lowered his head onto her chest and she stroked his hair and kissed him again.

'What have they got you doing?'

'We're working on sitting. I can do it now without holding anything. Two weeks ago I couldn't do that.'

'That's good, darling.'

'A few more weeks and I'll be home.'

'Did they tell you that?'

'No, but I'll be strong enough.'

'That's good. I've spoken with occupational health again. They said they're going to come around and look at the house.'

'Can we go somewhere quiet?'

'Your room?'

'Yes.'

Robert got up and pivoted into his chair. They left the physiotherapy hall and came out onto a patio. It looked out across a small courtyard with trees

and a stone fountain in the middle. The sky was gray and the grass was wet from rain.

'Where's your room?'

'Over by the fountain.'

'And you can just come out whenever?'

'Yes, they don't mind. They want me to.'

'That's lovely.'

'They still manage to make it hell.'

'What?'

'Come over here,' said Robert.

'Are they horrid to you?'

'No, they're fine. I need you. Please. Please, come here.'

Jenny walked over to him.

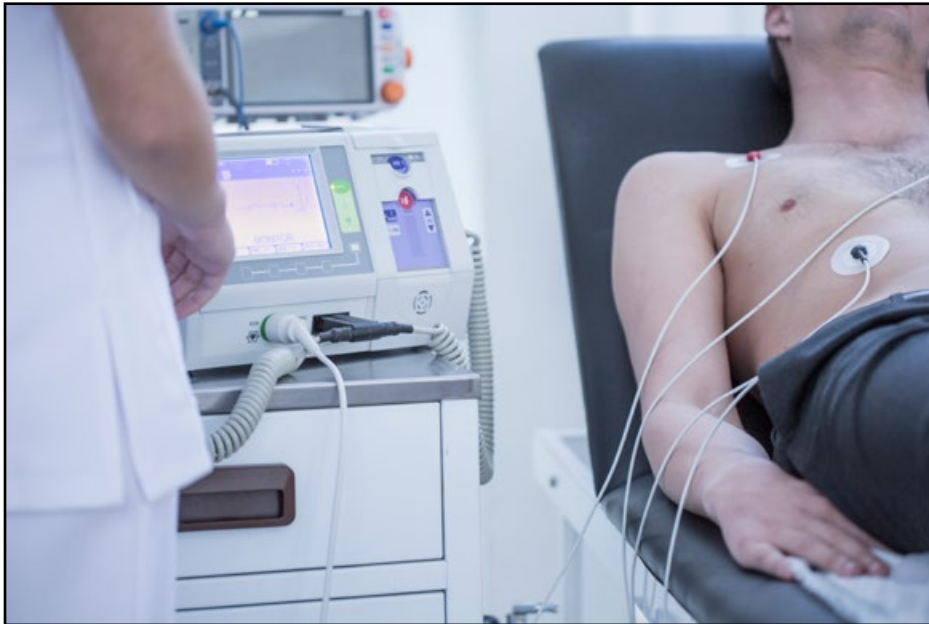
'I've missed you,' said Robert.

'I know. We've said that already.'

'Why are you being like that?'

'Because you need to rest.'

'I've been resting for months.'



**'Am I a  
good  
wife,  
Robbie?'**

'The physio is hard, that's all.'

'I'll talk to them. I'll tell them to go easy on you.'

'No, don't bother.'

'No, I will. I'll talk to Mr Lowry. He'll ease up if I say.'

'It's not him.'

'Who is it then? I can get them to be nice. Let me try. Please, Robert.'

'They are nice. Here's the room.'

'Oh, it's small, darling.'

Jenny closed the patio doors and pulled the curtains across. The room was dark.

'Can you lock the door too?'

Jenny walked over to the door and locked it.

'I haven't.'

'I love you.'

'Yes, I love you too, but you should've told me about the physio. I don't like to think of you like that. I don't like it.'

'There's nothing wrong. Just come closer.'

Robert lay on the bed; all the anxiousness had gone. He felt tired. Jenny ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him.

'Am I a good wife, Robbie?'

It was raining hard and the smell of damp stone came through the open doors and made Robert cough.

'I love you,' said Jenny. She stood up

and opened a brown leather holdall. 'I've brought you some books.' She smiled at him. 'God, Robbie, don't look so dead. It's frightening.'

'I'm resting. And thank you for the books.'

Robert listened as Jenny fussed around the room. She kissed him goodbye and promised to come again with Henry. The room was a great deal neater.

~

The late spring brought flowers to the courtyard and the dull greens of winter exploded into light. Robert spent most of his time by the open doors looking out onto the patio. In the mornings the air was cold and he would read and wait for it to warm up. He liked to imagine that his grandfather was with him, and that he was young again. They would be talking about the old times, and about where they came from and what type of people they were.

Robert's father was a coward but he didn't mind so much. It's easy to be a coward. Robert was strong like his grandfather. His father had gone away when he was very young and his grandfather had come to live with them about the same time. He was tall and kind of weathered looking. When he first arrived he had taken Robert fishing. When they got back home he had made Robert gut the fish, and when he cut himself he told him to carry on and clean the kitchen. His mother kept trying to help. She had fussed about it all day; how a boy shouldn't have to gut his own fish and that his grandfather should let up considering, and that type of thing. For supper his mother had cooked all the fish and they had salted it and eaten it with bread.

Jenny and Henry but mostly Jenny visited each week. Robert would roar into physio in the days between and made good progress. Jenny was pleased but thought that everyone there was horrid and pushing him too hard. She'd get worked up about it and they would try and talk about something else. She couldn't see the point if he was still there.

That year ran unseasonably hot. By April the grass had shocked into life and the trees plumped their leaves and stretched their branches and the blossom fell to the ground like snow. The wet sum-

mer heat affected Robert. Old coughs returned and scars that should have healed became infected and painful. The courtyard grew ugly for him. When the doors were closed he would draw the curtains and sit alone and wait for the pain to go.

~

The valley came alive that summer. Had Jenny not been alone she would have noticed the change. The lawn grew in small uneven tufts choked by dandelions and weeds but Jenny decided that they were flowers and looked quite fine. Henry liked it all the same. They had got him a playhouse that she'd put up next to the conservatory. She had lay on the cool paving until two in the morning putting it together. That night she had felt quite alone and since then had made a habit of going to bed when it was still light.

The grandparents no longer stayed over. Jenny didn't need them and it was nice spending the evenings with Henry. Besides, she didn't feel any less alone if they were there.

Jenny grew to hate the summer. When the mornings were cold and clear she would hope that they would stretch into the evening and the days ahead. Eventually they did.

The assessors were helpful. They came a few weeks later with the news that they had enough that Robert could come home. Henry was at the nursery the day Robert came back. They had planned it like that so they could throw a party for Henry. After the people had gone they went into the conservatory where it was cool.

'You must think I'm such a sap, Robbie. I thought I'd got it all out of my system.'

'I cried too.'

'But I bawled, Robbie. I made a whole scene of it. I think the doctor thought I was crazy. I think I probably am.'

'You are.'

'Yes, I am.'

Robert looked at the grass and laughed.

Jenny looked at him. 'I think it's pretty. It looks like a meadow or something, don't you think?'

'What's Henry think of it?'

'You should see him, darling. He gets lost in it. He loves it though. You never liked cutting it anyway.'

'No, I didn't.'

Jenny walked them back to the living room. She lifted out a carrier bag from the cot and pulled out some bright silver bunting.

'I've become quite handy, Robbie. You'll see. Not that I want to be or anything but did you see the playhouse?'

'The one we got him? Yes.'

'Yes. I put it all together. It came flat packed.'

'That's good.'

Robert watched as Jenny reached high up and tacked one end of the bunting to the wall. She quickly moved to the other side and lifted the bunting straight. It had blue lettering on it saying happy birthday. Jenny glanced back at Robert.

'Don't look like that, Robbie. What else was I supposed to get?'

They looked at each other and burst out laughing. Jenny walked over to Robert and sat on his knee.

'I'm terrible really. That playhouse took me until two in the morning. I'm hopeless at it.'

'I wasn't thinking that.'

'I don't mind, darling. I don't have to be handy anymore. I love you, darling. You know that don't you?'

'I love you more.'

'Yes, but I mean nothing's changed. I want you to know that. We're just the same.'

'You're very sweet.'

'No, it's important, Robbie. Nothing's changed. I love you.'

'Are you crying?'

'Yes, darling. I'm so silly. I'm making it all about me again.'

'No, darling.'

Jenny stood up and dried her eyes. She looked at the room and started laughing. She was quite tired. The doorbell rang. Robert and Jenny went to the door and opened it. Henry was jumping up and down and threw himself into Robert. Jenny walked out to the car and helped Robert's mother bring in

supper.

'Are you happy?'

'Yes, very much,' said Jenny.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Otto Alexander has always loved stories. From the adventures of 'Hal and Roger' as a boy to re-reading 'A Farewell to Arms,' the feeling is always the same, that these characters are alive. His favorite things to read*

*are by Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck and the short stories by F. Scott Fitzgerald. He's previously been published in Literally Stories and has upcoming publications in Twelve House Books' Current Short Stories, Vol. One.*

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**INTERVIEW**

# Jennifer Lieberman

## A Multifaceted Talent

JENNIFER LIEBERMAN is from Maple, Canada and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from York University in Toronto. She has appeared in over thirty stage productions in Toronto, New York City, Los Angeles, Europe and Australia; including her Award-Winning solo-show 'Year of the Slut,' which her Amazon #1 Best Selling novel 'Year of the What?' was adapted from. In addition to her performance career, she has penned a number of screen and stage plays; her short films Leash and Details which both screened at the Festival De Cannes' Court Métrage among other international film festivals as well as the wacky web-series Dumpwater Divas. Jennifer is also the founder of Make Your Own Break and has helped over 100 creatives bring their own productions to life.

**WG: "Make your own break" you said. Could you explain what you mean by that?**

**JL:** In the acting world there's a lot of waiting around for that 'big break,' or to get picked, or discovered. All that waiting around can be frustrating and unfulfilling, so instead of waiting for someone to choose me for a role or choose my script to get made or choose my book to publish, I decided to choose myself and create my own opportunities; write my own scripts, produce my own films/plays and to publish my own books. Sure, I'd love to be working on bigger scale productions and sell my scripts to studios and Nextworks, but until that happens I'm going to continue to create, craft and fine tune my skills by putting in the reps every day, because it's simply what I do. There are hundreds

of talented people who haven't 'made it' yet, just like you, find them and work with them and maybe one day you will be the studio.



**WG: Plays, films, acting, directing, producing, writing... if you had to pick only one, which would it be and why?**

**JL:** My first love is hands down performance, that is definitely my first choice stage or screen, ideally I'll always have one foot in each. But the reality of being solely an actor/performer is having very little control over your career, coming back to that 'waiting to get picked' issue. As a writer and a producer I get to stay in the game and create opportunities for myself when I'm otherwise





in between gigs I've been hired for as an actor.

**WG: What would be your second choice?**

**JL:** Writing would be number two, getting to create worlds and characters and stories, I really love that. Don't get me wrong, producing is fun, it's like one giant puzzle with dozens of moving pieces that you have to figure out, and I find it stimulating, and I am so grateful it's a skill I have worked hard to develop. However, given the choice, I do prefer to stay on the more creative side of things.

**WG: Before any success, just starting out, the level of insecurity must have been enormous. How did you develop the conviction to press forward?**

**JL:** I grew up as a competitive gymnast so I did have a certain amount of confidence and discipline coming into the game. I also think that being young and completely clueless was also helpful, it allowed me to be fearless in a lot of ways. I also had an overwhelming conviction, so nothing was going to deter me.

**WG: Is there anything special you do when you feel stressed, or uncomfortable?**

**JL:** Yoga! I have a regular yoga practice and love how the consistent routine brings balance to my day. Especially as a writer, it's easy to get lost in my head, having something that can ground me in my body and the immediate moment is truly a blessing. It's also important to me to connect with nature regularly and go on hiking trails often. Cooking is another activity I find enjoyable while de-stressing. I love experimenting with different types of recipes to see what I can recreate as a vegan dish.

**WG: You've said "Chasing Hollywood" wasn't for you. How did you find your experience producing, writing, directing for indie films, and did you experience any difficulties there, and if so, how did you deal with that?**

**JL:** First, let me clarify, what I meant by 'chasing Hollywood' was that whole notion of running around trying to get picked - trying to get an agent, trying to get an audition, trying to get a role, trying to get a foot in the door, trying to do a million things that are not the one thing you are actually there for - to create.

This is the hustle that so many people get caught up in when they move to LA and yes some of it is necessary, but it can be very overwhelming if you don't figure out how to pace yourself and what your actual goals and priorities are. So I didn't leave, I just changed my goals. I started focusing on making my own projects and helping friends and colleagues do the same thing on a small scale, to get into festivals, network, collaborate and do the things we were there to do.

There are always challenges putting a production together, executing it, completing it and releasing it. Most scripts don't make it to production, does that mean they were a waste? Not at all, that script will lead to the next script and the next one and with each one the writing gets tighter, the dialogue sharper, the plot more intricate. Sometimes there are logistical problems, location issues, personality conflicts, and being a good producer is being able to deal with them all at once, on time and on budget. Sure it can be stressful, but it's also thrilling working with dozens of people coming together to create something. It's pretty cool. And every challenge or disaster averted is like a badge of honor to add to the collection.

**WG:** Where do you see your future? Any pull in one direction over

**another?**

**JL:** In the future I see more of what I'm doing on a bigger scale. I'll continue to write and perform and produce for film and theater. I also do see a few more books in my future.

**WG:** Any advice to new writers? Pitfalls, things to avoid. Things you wish you'd known earlier?

**JL:** 1 - Stick to your guns, only you know the style, the voice and the story you're going for. Everyone will have an opinion so you need conviction.

2 - Be patient. Give yourself time to develop your style. It only comes from doing the reps over time. Stick with it.

If anyone wants to follow me I'm @ iamjenlieberman on all social media or [www.MakeYourOwnBreak.com](http://www.MakeYourOwnBreak.com)



## *In memoriam*

# Jim Christina

## 1949-2022

When we enter this life, we are each of us given a measure of life. For some, that measure lasts longer than others. What matters most is what we do with that measure we are given.

Jim Christina lived his life to the fullest measure.

Born James Lambert Christina in 1949 to an Air Force family he grew up in Del Mar, California when the family's travels around the world finally ended. After graduating college, Jim served in the U.S. Army for a decade, returned to the States, and joined his father's paint business in the Pacific Northwest. It was then he began writing songs, both the music and the lyrics and formed a band, Sundown, and the writing bug had firmly taken hold of him.

An idea for a character, and a series of books, had been forming for years in Jim's head and in 2008 he put them down on paper. What followed were several books set in the Old West, Jim being a historian as well as a poet, musician, and writer.

Unlike Louis L'Amour, Jim's stories of the Old West were, in his own words: "If you are looking for Louis L'Amour, you won't find him here. If you are looking for a walloping good story, turn the pages (of my books) and start reading."

Jim wrote and published nearly twenty novels set in the Old West and a collection of his song lyrics, *That's All You Get*.

While Jim would never try to pick just one book as the best he'd written, his 2017 novel, *Jonah Blue*, was listed as required reading for a college history course. His follow-up novel in 2019, *Jefferson's Chance*, was an incredible story of a young man who lost his leg as a child, but never lost his dream of becoming a Texas Ranger.

But he was not finished blazing his trail in the written world.

In 2015 he had teamed up with Bobbi Jean Bell and created *The Writer's Block*, a weekly one-hour radio show broadcast on LA Talk Radio. The show featured a different author every week, allowing



that author to introduce their book to an audience that eventually grew to an overall listenership – live and on-demand – of over 600,000 people every week from around the world.

For Jim, meeting new authors and finding out about their works and how they approached the art of writing, fascinated him. Many of those authors quickly became long-time friends, including one who he would collaborate with on a novel as well as form a new publishing house.

After writing *The Last Lonely Trail* with Richard Paolinelli, Jim merged his Black Dog Publishing with Richard's Tuscany Bay Publishing. In 2017, Tuscany Bay Books was born – *Jonah Blue* was his first book released under the new publishing house - and would publish nearly 50 novels, books and anthologies involving nearly a hundred authors in five years.

Jim Christina passed away at his home in Star, Idaho on June 19, 2022. He is survived by his wife, Gerry; his children, Joseph Christina, Margaret Christina Boyce, and Monica Hale Ferguson; his nieces Patricia Cunningham and Ginia Christina; his siblings: Wallace Christina, Margaret Christina Wells, Bonnie Christina Ingram, and Patrick Christina; and his beloved dog, Bella; as well as an incredible legacy in the publishing world.

A full measure of life given, a full measure of a life lived.

*~Submitted by Richard Paolinelli*

# First Pages

A study of published author first page of their novels.



## YEAR OF THE WHAT? by Jennifer Lieberman

### DECEMBER: Used

"Who the fuck is Candice?"

It was 10:38 p.m. on a Tuesday night in early December.

Curled up, naked on the bed, soggy and drained. Alone in a cramped, dimly lit, boutique hotel room in Manhattan, I sobbed. My stomach tight in knots, throat closed and skin clammy. Mascara running down my face, staining the crumpled white linens as the painted tear drops fell. I was still covered with Russell and strangled by one thought, choking on it, nauseous and gasping...my insides at a crossroads between implosion and volcanic eruption. My body shook as my thoughts wailed...

"Who the fuck is Candice!"

I crawled over to the mini-bar and swallowed a mini-bottle of vodka. I relished the sting as it went down and quickly reached for another. As the mini-bottles of poison swam through my veins I pulled myself together and called Kelly. She would be over in twenty minutes. I took another bottle, I think it was rum that time, sucked it back slowly, desperate to put out the fire that was burning my insides. I stumbled into the shower to wash the past hour away. To wash Russell off of me.

Kelly arrived as I was getting out of the shower. I answered the door naked. She wrapped her arms around me, then rolled in the room with two large suitcases. I gazed at them as I collapsed onto the bed, whining, with another mini bottle in hand.

As always, Kelly didn't hold back, despite my fragile and naked state. "I'm actually happy this happened," she said with a smile as she opened one of the suitcases, which happened to be empty.

She filled it with items from the room: pillows, alarm clock, lamp, towels, toilet paper, basically anything that would fit in the suitcases. "Now you can finally move on from Russell. For good. You've wasted over four years on the guy, two too many in my opinion." Kelly continued around the room, searching for items to fill her bags.

"Are we stealing, is that what you brought the suitcases for?"

"It's not stealing, they have Russell's credit card number...they'll charge him for everything," she said casually, raising her eyebrows and flashing a devilish grin.

Kelly was a tall, curvy redhead from Texas with small breasts, infectious laughter and a 'the party comes with me' attitude. At 5'9" she possessed a striking 'suicide girl' beauty. We met working at a café in Hell's Kitchen the summer I finished university. The summer I moved to New York City from a small town in Canada. Two months after I got to the Big Apple, I took the room that opened up in her apartment around the corner from the cafe. Kelly was the most outrageous person I'd ever met...and I loved it!

She wasn't refined, but she was, in fact, a genius, at least according to her IQ score. She dabbled in photography and bisexuality and recreationally experimented with drugs and Mary Jane. She had a full scholarship to NYU and remained at the top of her class no matter how much she partied. She also had a lot of sex and was really free about it; still a virgin when I moved in, I was both inwardly intrigued and outwardly judgmental about her promiscuity. She was grounded and confident in her behavior, and my reactions of shock and condemnation rarely fazed her.

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# First Pages

A study of published author first page of their novels.



## KEEPER OF THE JEWEL by Richard H. Stephens

### Tremors

“We should just lay siege to his castle and be done with it.” Khae Wys held the King of the Elves’ stare without blinking. It had been a long day deliberating grievances with the inhabitants of South March. A few involving a certain, rogue duke.

The king raised thin eyebrows. “Really?”

A slow smile dimpled Khae’s cheeks, her pale skin and pure white hair marking her as an elf as surely as the pointed ears securing her husband’s spun gold tiara in place—a diamond-shaped piece of dragon ivory resting in the centre of his forehead. “No, not really, but some days I find myself wondering how to deal with him.”

Disappointment registered on the king’s features.

Khae rose from the Willow Throne, cupped his gaunt face in her hands, and kissed him deeply, thinking all the while, *May the faeries keep this elf of mine*. Her precious husband would do anything for her. If she asked him to fall on the rapier hanging from his belt, he would do so without a second thought if it meant her happiness. If only her brother would be so noble and utilize his own sword in the same manner.

For some reason her brother, Orlythe Wys, had always strayed from the norm. Growing up, she never thought much of his strange ways. Named after their father, the original king of South March, Orlythe was older than Khae and her twin sister, Odyne, by several years. She had idolized him as an elfling. Admired how proudly he bore the family name. But, according to elven law, Orlythe had to be content with the fact that when their parents’ rule came to an end, it was the eldest female who ascended the throne.

Not that she had wanted it. As far as Khae was concerned, Orlythe was welcome to the burden of spending the rest of his life appeasing the masses—a thankless task if ever there was one.

Khae had been quite content during her parents’ reign. As South March’s chief practitioner of nature’s essence, her duty had required her to be in tune with the subtle nuances and shifts in the environment—seeking out and analyzing portents that might become problematic. There weren’t many elves adept in the workings of the delicate magics to call themselves practitioners of the art.

Her brother, on the other hand, was a natural leader. His skill with the broader magic at his command, and indeed, his prowess with his rapier, separated him from the regular fighters of the land. In Khae’s estimation, Orlythe’s biggest downfall was his vocal support of those who desired to bring the dragon community to heel. He had been heard more than once saying that a dragon rider was worth ten warriors on horseback.

But as history recalled, that hadn’t always been the case. The attempted assassination of the great, blue dragon known as Grimclaw had fleshed out that false supposition. Many dragons had died at the hands of the skilled horse riders from the north. If the elves weren’t careful how they dealt with the dragons who had remained loyal to South March, Khae feared the majestic beasts would follow Grimclaw into the wilderness beyond the cities of man. An act she genuinely believed would lead to dragonkind’s extinc-

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A recording studio setup featuring a computer monitor displaying the 'Dynamic ABTS Musical Academy and Recording Studio' logo, a large orange speaker, a mixing console, and various audio equipment. The scene is lit with blue and purple light. A hand is visible on the right side of the frame.

# **MUSIC IN THE KEY OF LIFE**

**an interview  
with**

**Greg Goodell**

**musician  
songwriter  
producer**



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Gregory Goodell is a music producer from the Boise, ID area and is owner and proprietor of Dynamic Arts Musical Academy and Recording Studios. He is the lead singer of Devil's County and is involved with multiple musical projects, including production, engineering, and consultation. He manages the Dynamic Arts Wrecking Crew, Lookout! Point.

His story of life is as valid for a musical career as much as a writing career. In fact, the lessons learned are more about life than anything else.

Books & Pieces Magazine wants to highlight professionals and their journey toward success.

GG: My college instructors used to say that inspiration is for amateurs, because if you sit around waiting to be inspired, you're going to be sitting around a long time and you're going to miss a lot of opportunities. If you're good at what you do, just do it. Figure it out, make it happen.

**WG: Any creative work is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration.**

GG: That's right. Absolutely. It's all hard work. I know people think it's some gift, and it's like, no, you have an innate talent for some measure of it. Some people can hear music in their heads, and some people can see words. But I think after that, it really is a skill set that you have to bust your chops out and hone, hone, hone. Just because you can listen to music doesn't mean that you actually have a true aesthetic for what is good or bad. One of the things that I wrote in a college paper was that a lot of people today complain that all music today is terrible. And my answer to that is there's good music and there's terrible music through all eras. One of the things that happen as you're growing up and turn into a teenager, you're creating formative things in your brain. These new neurons are firing. These new memories are being formed. These

brand new first times. First kiss. First time I rode this one carnival ride. First time when you got married. When you drove your first car.

**WG: First time I heard stereo, right?**

GG: Yeah, anything like that. One of the first times I really realized stereo was, such a powerful thing. I was listening to the Beatles' Revolver album and some of that stuff was just incredible how they could move around in the stereo field. And it sounded so good.





**WG: It was clean and simple.**

GG: Yeah. And the White Album, too, although that was a little more experimental. But I loved it. You have to evolve if you want to maintain relevance. I'm sure this is true with writing or anything else. You have to remain relevant to what is happening. And that goes back to what I was saying before about the paper I was writing—all those first times. You relate to these songs—they can be terrible songs and you hate them, too, but when you hear them later in life, you're thinking it was such a good song. Such a great ride. And you're a '69 Mustang. That's what that is. That's what you're hearing. What you're hearing in your heart, the first time you drove that car, the first time when your daughter was born, and things like that. But when you start running out of first times, that's when you quit associating it with music. Not just music, but film and books, too. Unless you're more open than the average person, or you're just constantly consuming this stuff. You and I are constant consumers consuming? We try and stay relevant.

**WG: I think you've added a lot of depth over the years, not necessarily that you changed that much, but your bank of experience has gotten a lot bigger.**

GG: Well, the experiences, the things that you've done, the people

that you've met, the lessons that you've learned, and the mistakes that you made. Failures are very important. You got to have failure because that's where you get your push-through from. That's where you get to get back up and do it again.

**WG: It has to be pain.**

GG: Absolutely. That's why so many artists are tortured, and people go, well, why was he this way? He was kind of insane already.

**WG: There was a period of time that was a cool thing. If you weren't tortured, you weren't really cool.**

GG: True for whatever form. I think one of the things that happen now in society, is these kids are living these perfect lives in these very bubble-wrapped environments where there's nothing even there to hurt their feelings per se.

**WG: Oh, God, yes.**

GG: I don't know what they do anymore because I think society spent so much time trying to spare feelings and trying to equalize so that people that weren't as able are made to feel that they are equally



“  
**Inspiration is for amateurs, because if you sit around waiting to be inspired, you're going to be sitting around a long time.**

able. The way that I even have to deal with artists these days is a little more strange. I made a grown man cry. I did. Well, one of the reasons people come to me for what I do is most of them apparently know I have no filter.

**WG: None?**

GG: And I'm honest to a fault. Well, how was that? And I'd go back over the talkback microphone and say, well, that was terrible. Can we try again? And then I'll literally go and teach him a vocal lesson. Well, by the time we were done with a voice lesson, this 50-year-old man was in tears because he had never been spoken to that way, told that way, and then taken on a tour of all his weaknesses.

**WG: But it's a great lesson, isn't it? And that's what they should teach in school instead of sheltering. I consider myself fortunate, and I'm sure you do too. I was born in an age they didn't pacify you.**

GG: No one gave a shit what your feelings were. I've had it fall apart before with these types of people, because one of the things that happens when you confront them is you realize there is nothing there, and they realize there's nothing there, too. And so then we have to figure out how are we finishing this project? How are we going to get through this time? And usually, if it's not the front part of the group or something like that, we can work through with session musicians, or I

can do it myself to fix it. But if they're the mouthpiece of the group, let's say, for instance, the guy is a singer and a frontman, but he can't sing and he's not good at being a front man, that makes life really hard. I'll say this, everybody can do a little of everything if they apply themselves.

**WG: How's the music business today?**

GG: Everything is booming. I'm so busy that it's not even funny. I've got a lot to have done by next week. I've got about nine or ten songs to mix, edit, boom, out the door before I take on another three or four, and then another couple from a different artist. I've got to get all those headed out the door not too long after that. And, there's live music happening. I've got performances booked for the first time in a long time.

And it's incredible. And I'm seeing these new young artists out there, which is great because there's been a little bit of a vacuum lately, somewhat in the musical world. Most of the time it's been us middle-aged guys and older guys very active. You look at the legacy bands, how old are they getting now? I mean, even Metallica, you know, they're getting up there.

**WG: Okay. Tell me about little Greg. How did Greg start in all of this?**

GG: Well, I always loved singing as a kid. My grandmother would listen to music all day long, mainly old honky tonk country and old Australian songs, pre-World War II Australia

recordings, and stuff like that. Basically Australian country. I listened to those reels every day for 8 hours a day, five days a week when I was a small child. And that's probably where I gained some of my aesthetic for music, mostly through osmosis. And then I was asked if I wanted to play an instrument because I enjoyed playing the recorder, as all children do, or most children do, to the horror of my parents. I said yes, but I wanted to play the clarinet. My dad said, 'No, you're not playing the clarinet. You can play the saxophone.'

### **WG: Why?**

GG: I have no real idea. Possibly it was a manlier instrument. I don't know. There was a lot of sax stuff being played in music? Kenny G was about to hit. He hadn't hit yet, but he was about to. Bill Clinton hadn't played the sax yet on stage at his inauguration. Saxophones are for boys. And so I got my first saxophone, and I played, and I was that kid who never practiced all the things that I now tell my students to do. I didn't do it okay. I didn't even have any real natural inclination to it. I couldn't read beat. I could read the notes well. But beat and timing and stuff like that, I was no good. But I still liked participating in band. I had one of the greatest band instructors ever, Mark Krueger. You could hear him on the second floor in another building as he was yelling at us. It was brilliant. I loved him so much. He was probably one of the angriest men I've ever shared a room with. He was a bald gentleman, and his head would turn beet red when he was mad at me. He did a lot for the music in his community. He got a lot of the grants.

And a lot of the instruments the kids are still playing 30 years later are from the grants that Krueger got. In high school, I wasn't a sporty, kid. Band was somewhere that I fit. And some of my friends were there. They were seniors that year. One of them was a super-senior, too. We called him the magical 13th grader. But he was great. He was a great player, like, a really great player. And they didn't haze me.

That's where I found my home. And so I started

playing, and I wanted to play to their level.

That was the first time I was interested—truly interested—in becoming better. I wanted to play to their level, and then I did, and then I played beyond their level, and then I played beyond everyone's. I had no rival. Then I got bored with the saxophone at age 16, I had played with Gene Harris at the Gene Harris Jazz festival, with Curtis Steigers and Red Halloway. It was a stupid, silly school thing, but I still count that as my first real gig because it was with real musicians.

And the only reason I got to play was I was one of the only kids that didn't go to lunch. And I was peeking in through the door so I could see Gene Harris. They're like, hey, kid, come on in here. You play? It was one of those things. And so I went and I played a couple of times with them, freeform jazz and also on stage, which was cool. That was beyond cool, one of the coolest things ever for a 16-year-old kid. I didn't realize how cool it really was because I was 16 and stupid, but that's what it was. And then some of the most amazing things to me in those days were orchestrating and composing things, even if there were things that I already knew. To hear the chords resonate together, was this feeling that was better than any drug to me or anything. It just felt almost like a voice from above, a light shining out of the clouds when these chords were created.

So I formed my first band, and I think I was about age 17 then. At that point, I had started playing drums. I was learning from my dear friends Mr. Schaefer, Kelly Long and Aaron Mitts. They're all local drummers here. Jake actually still plays music with me to this day, and so does Kelly.

### **WG: When did you move to Emmett, Idaho?**

GG: I was nine years old. The true musical journey began here. I learned the drums and I decided to learn the guitar. And that didn't go so well. So I sold my first guitar. This is irony. It is the most supreme form because I was so mad at it. I took two lessons. Two lessons. My piousness arrogance.

**WG: It's called youth.**

GG: True. Well, at that time I'm one of the best saxophone players in the state, not just for my age, but in the state, possibly the northwest. That gives you a big ego boost. And before my injuries, I was a really good drummer. Scary good drummer. So I thought, guitars should be easy. No, it wasn't. I took two lessons. It was one of those things I'd be angry and I'd keep coming back to it and it just didn't work out. So I traded it for another saxophone. I tell all my students that story.

I've been playing professionally since that first gig at age 16, I had an oldies rockabilly band. So we're playing this fusion of 50s Doo-wop and old 1940s swing, singing, mixed with 50s rockabilly. It worked, but I'm not sure how. We were always busy. We were doing car shows. All over the place. And between that and my first job running a sound company, Road Guys Sound Productions with my buddy Jake. He hired me as a sound engineer. Basically, I coiled cables and did whatever he told me to out in the hot sun while he sat having a beer. Music was not only something that I enjoyed doing, but music started becoming my source of income. And all my friends would go to work at McDonald's or the Roe Ann Drive In restaurant or whatever, work their ass off all week long and come home with a \$50 check and they couldn't hang out. They couldn't have fun. We couldn't go swimming. Now I went to work. I worked for 1 hour on Sunday and I brought home \$200 every week. And then I worked gigs on top of that, another \$200 for some music.

**WG: that's a good thing.**

GG: It was great because the work was awesome. I had to have my free time because I lived out on a ranch. And so before I did any of this I had to help with the sprinklers and with the animals and all of that kind of stuff. And at age 19, I got injured. I got run over by a hay trailer and it crushed all the metatarsals in my right foot. And that's why I'm not the best drummer anymore. I only got about

60% mobility back in my right foot.

**WG: I'd never have known.**

GG: I only limp in the wintertime. About three or four days out of the year, I'll have to walk with a cane. And just because the pain is too bad. There are eleven pins, three screws, two plates, and an ounce of donor bone welded into it. It looks like something out of Hellraiser. And then something happened. I got my first real job. I was working in security, and one of my first tours of duty was working at the prison. And I was really nervous about going in that first night. I had anxiety. There's no sidearm there either, but I had worked at places like Loomis, Fargo and stuff like that. With a sidearm. I'm going to be in the prison and all I've got is pepper spray. And it's not even CS gas. It's pepper spray. I was nervous. I couldn't sleep.

So there was a guitar sitting downstairs. And mind you, remember I sold my guitar when I was 17 and traded the guitar for the saxophone. The band rehearsals were at my house, so I was around instruments all the time. So I went downstairs and there was this PV Raptor owned by the Jake. And it only had five strings on it rather than the normal accompaniment of six. And I picked it up and suddenly I could play. It was the most bizarre thing. Maybe I just needed some time. Maybe I needed a little bit of my arrogance to burn off. I played that guitar all night before I went and did a lovely tour of duty in the prison.

**WG: I thought you were going to tell me you played in the prison. No story, right?**

GG: No, I'm not that fun and fantastic. It was just something to kill my nerves before I went in and I discovered I could play. Six months after that, I was playing live, playing guitar, and making money, because Red had told me that there was no real money in saxophone where I was.

I had also dabbled in recording. Just dabbled. We had tape machines. You saw the tape machine in the other room. I have an old analog eight-track

tape machine up here.

**WG: I remember when you got it and had to dissect it to get it working. Great old-school stuff there.**

GG: You came in the day I had all the cards pulled out of it, right? Yeah. I've always been very hands-on. You probably noticed around here, if something needs fixing, I'm the one that fixes it. I try to work on everything. Like yesterday I was working on PIP cards for a Crown amplifier. I felt like a caveman trying to figure out a microwave because I've got the manual in one hand, and I'm looking at these 30 little buttons and sliders and realizing it's like a bunch of little Lego bricks on here, too. You can move everything around. Oh, my goodness. I finally got it programmed, but the only thing I was thinking in my head was that a real studio would have someone to do this for you.

**WG: Cathartic:**

GG: It makes me feel good. Yeah, it makes me feel good. There's only one person I can blame if something goes wrong. That's how we learn. And like I said, most of my instructors were very yelly, angry people. And so that's how I cope. It's how I deal with things because that's how I was taught to deal with things.

So I played in a lot of groups, doing a lot of things in a lot of different styles, all the way from swing and jazz, rockabilly to hard rock and heavy metal. I've shared

the stage with people like Alice In Chains, Godsmack, Jane's Addiction. The list goes on and on. It's all wonderful. The highest points that I have right now are the kids that are learning and doing. I can't look back at any performances or gigs or say this was the greatest night of my life or anything.

Kelly, the drummer, and I started counting up all our gigs and shows, and performances. We quit counting when we hit 1800 separate shows. And that was when we were 28. And the frequency actually increased after that. And we'd only been playing out since we were 19. We were 19 with fake IDs. I had the fake ID and was appalled at how much alcohol actually costs when my 21st birthday rolled around. Because I'd been paid to party for free for two years.

**WG: It's a lot more expensive now.**

GG: I love the whiskies. You have flavors that all come at. I like every whiskey to be like a good novel. It takes you on this little journey. I've got different kinds here. I keep them for my clients. I have my fine whiskies, and then I have my roughneck whiskey. And everybody's happy because not everybody's going to appreciate an 18-year-old Scotch.

Anyway I taught for years and years. I had a studio in my garage and studio in the loosest terms ever. It was in a garage and not a nice garage. And we called it Hillbilly engineering because it truly was. It

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**There's only one person I can blame if something goes wrong. That's how we learn.**

was the most redneck thing you ever saw. I'd have foam taped around microphones, the cheapest microphones that I could afford. I had no money.

**WG: You went to college later in life?**

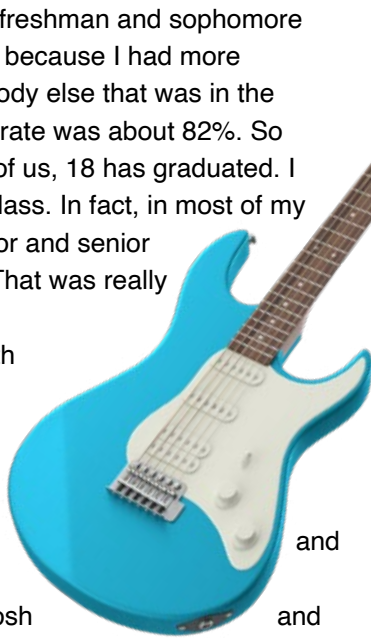
GG: One of my buddies said, well, why don't you make it real? Why don't you go to College? Why don't you get the paper that says that you're educated in this? I just finished school for music production and recording. I have a degree, a Bachelor's of Science in Music Production and Musical Engineering.

**WG: So just the second question quickly. Outside of the paper it's printed on, was it worth it?**

GG: Absolutely. My freshman and sophomore year, I skated through because I had more experience than anybody else that was in the school. The wash out rate was about 82%. So out of every hundred of us, 18 has graduated. I graduated top in my class. In fact, in most of my classes, even my junior and senior year, I set the curve. That was really cool.

I was confronted with ideas that I had never considered. I had two instructors that just run me ragged. And I hated them then, I absolutely adore them now. Dr. Macintosh and Viet Renn, They were amazing, absolutely amazing. And he used to do pop records. He'd work with Justin Timberlake, Christina Aguilera, all that kind of stuff.

I've also done stuff at Washington State in the classical music department and the Lionel Hampton Jazz School. I was also accepted to Manus Music Conservatory in New York. But I did nothing more than just head out for orientation, check it out, and decide I didn't want to go there. All that means is I am able to be a music instructor.



And what do I do today? 50 percent of what I do is instruct in music.

And the music production in the studio just grew from there. I started to outgrow the little space that I had. Then I moved into a larger building. That's when the studio really started to expand.

**WG: And you opened Sagelands music.**

GG: I took on a job teaching guitar for the original owners of Sagelands Music. I had taught music at several other institutions locally and privately as a contractor up to that point. Due to some business ventures falling short, they cut their losses and moved back to their point of origin (the Seattle/Tacoma area) and left me the business. I taught and created programs, and they helped me with the book keeping (which I am awful at.)

And so when I got this job, it was a godsend. They're wonderful people. Truly, I would have none of what I have right now without their help and letting me take that business as a startup and putting me where I was. And it was hard.

And I had Sagelands for a year and a half to two years. At that point, I was doing the musical recording works. I had just started to refine my craft and started getting serious. If you don't know your science, then it becomes very difficult. So I've been gaining knowledge. That's one of the most important things in this field. You need to stay up to date. I check Billboard once every few months, whether I need to or not, so I can see the musical trends, understand what's happening, what's popular, because it's really strange in music.

**WG: So I'm going to ask you some hypothetical questions. If I throw at you an obscene amount of money at you, and say that you can't do any of this. All you can do is go back to playing sax?**

GG: Okay.

**WG: Okay. Same question with any other**

**instrument.**

GG: Okay. So there's the passion part. The overriding thing is I want to be happy. I want to take care of my family. Look...I have a diagnosed mental illness. And so all of this is like an addiction. This is my focus, this is my outlet, and I don't think I could stop. I have to always do something musically. And I'm a strange cat too, as far as what I'm doing. My frustration comes from doing 12 or 13 things at once. I'm simultaneous like that to a point where it's so disjointed that people come in to visit me and they'll stop. They'll just leave because they can't handle what I'm doing, because I'm going from this room and I'll work on this for 3 seconds. And then I'll glue up a tile that was starting to fall down. And then I'll go and I'll start tuning the piano, and then halfway through tuning the piano, I'll leave the wrench right in it and go on— oh, I need to do this real quick, and I need to tune the drums, and then I need to go and set mics for a session in three days. And as I walk through I need to lay sessions for this song. And it's all totally random, and it's depressing to me because it feels like I get nothing done, and then suddenly, boom, everything's all done at the same time. It's a strange process.

WG: How do people around you deal with that?

GG: With me, it drives them nuts because, a friend of mine, Jeremy, said that I'm much like a gnome. I just wander around like Hephestus at the gates of Hell.

**WG: But it works for you.**

GG: Yeah, but every once in a while you get

back to that crippling self doubt. If I am paid to do something, obviously I do it. But, I don't think you could pay me to stop, though.

**WG: Let me ask you a different variation on it. You can do this. This is your domain, this is your world. Or you can work for somebody else for good money, great money, in a studio that's 50 times better. Which of the two would you choose?**

**I was confronted with ideas that I had never considered. I had two instructors that just run me ragged. And I hated them then, and I absolutely adore them now.**

GG: I rather like what I'm creating now because of a lot of things, I don't work well and play well with others. I would eventually piss my boss off. And that kind of gig, that's not forever. I have no control. I have no control over it. This is as long as I can sustain it. There's something new and different that changes and evolves every week. I couldn't go in and work for somebody in a stagnant, stale environment.

There's a cool vibe here. One of the things that I'm enjoying here is that my business is increasing. I'm so busy, it's not even funny. And I don't advertise. It evolves every day. And what's cool about a building like this is that if I need to punch a hole in the ceiling, I could punch a hole in the ceiling with my gear. If I need to pull it apart and work on it, I can pull it apart and work on it because I do everything

myself. I make all the lists, I make all the things. I do all this. And I realize how much stuff I've learned how to do over the years out of necessity.

**WG: What's the future?**

GG: Well, I'm always working my craft. It would be nice for me to afford next-level gear. Everybody, of course, wants the next bigger and better thing is, from where I'm at right now, that would take some very considerable financial investment at this

point. That costs as much as a house. What I see from here, I'm growing. We will grow. We will serve more artists. I'm trying to figure that one out in my head how I'll be able to do it all myself. And perhaps the answer is I won't be able to keep doing this on my own.

And of course, with the passing of Bill Monti, the onus is now mine to educate and pass on. I was even toying for a while with being not a teacher anymore until he passed. And I realized that I've got to pass his lessons on to those who can pass those lessons on as well because I'm one of the only ones that was close enough to know him to teach those lessons. And so teaching is still in my future, too.



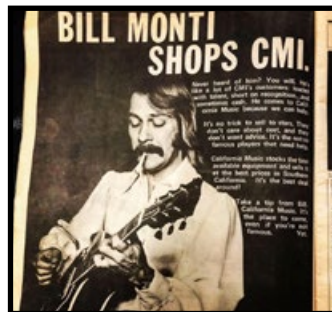
Bill Monti with Greg

Bill Monti was my mentor for over 15 years, and his loss has been hard. But we're moving forward. There's a lot of him in here. He taught me how to do so much of this and how to deal with people in a more appropriate way. He taught me how to not be taken advantage of because I like to please people. I like people to be happy. I like people to like me. And I think that's a

need of everybody. But I think it's more for me just because I was always that guy that, oh, my God, really? I'll help you with that, or I'll do that. I'll do that.

Don't worry about it. Don't worry about the cost. And that got me in trouble, not because of anything bad happening, but because people would take advantage of it. And then suddenly Bill would tell me, you know what? And I go, you're right. My goodness, these people are doing this to me. I didn't even realize that. He'd put on his fedora and turn around and walk out the door and let me cogitate on what he said for a while.

Before he passed, he would come in, and the last time I had this really awful, just debilitating couple of days of this anxiety with all these jobs to do. And he looks at me and he goes, "So how long is it going to take you to finish up all the projects before you hand it all off? And I said, well, I've got John in Texas and I've got Randy in Washington, and I've got this, and I've got this, and I've got this. And I named off this litany of things that I had to do. And he said, "Well, I ask you again, how long is it going to take?" And I said, well, it's probably going to take me about two months to cycle through all of this, maybe three to get everything finished



and done. And he said, "By the time that three months is over, this little funk you're in is going to be gone."

The more serious you become, the more invested you become, the more crippling certain things can be.

And usually, it's your own worry, your own self, going, you can't do this. And most of the time I'm teetering on the edge of confidence with just a taste of arrogance.

I had Bill to help guide me through that and to realize when I was being exploited or manipulated in some way. I've always been an honest person. I try to be. If I say, I'll have your \$50 on Friday, it doesn't matter what I've got to sell or what I've got to do. You'll have your \$50 on Friday. Really? I never found a necessity for lying. Sometimes little white lies to save people's feelings. Sometimes perhaps. But on the whole, the important things—lying, I just don't do. So when people lie to me, I don't understand it or I don't expect it because I don't do it. It's a strange thing. Shake hands, agreement. Now I've learned to get everything in writing.

Learn more about Greg and Dynamic Arts Musical Academy at: <https://www.fb.com/DynamicArtsMusic>

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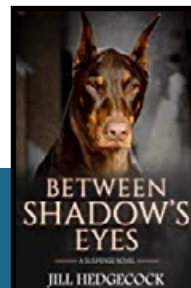
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## First Pages

A study of published author first page of their novels.



### BETWEEN SHADOW'S EYES: A Doberman Suspense Novel Series by Jill Hedgecock

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

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

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

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

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

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

I threaded an arm through the strap of my purse, tucked it against my body then braced myself as I opened the car door. The blast of unseasonably crisp April air bit through my thin cotton blouse. Strands of hair whipped my face as I stepped outside.

I hip-checked the door shut then leaned into the wind to walk the short distance to the porch of the one-story rancher I now called home. "SARAH WHITMAN" was written in large, bold letters on the notice. Fear fingered its way down my spine. I didn't need to open the envelope to know what it said:

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# First Pages

A study of published author first page of their novels.



## LUST, MONEY & MURDER - BOOKS 1, 2 & 3 by Mike Wells

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

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

But he had to be careful.

When she lay in his arms, spent, he said, "Did you know I am celebrating this weekend, *cara*?" He stroked one of her full, firm breasts. "You are a gift to myself."

She looked up at him with liquid brown eyes. "What do you mean? What are you celebrating?"

He rose naked from the bed and picked up a small leather Gucci bag that was sitting on the coffee table. He knew she was curious about what was inside—he had been carrying it around everywhere they went, keeping it close at all times.

When he opened it, she gave a little gasp.

The satchel was packed with crisp, new US \$100 bills.

"So much money," she said in a hush. "Where did it come from?"

"I sold a flat in Portofino, a dilapidated hovel I have been trying to rid myself of for years. I finally found an American gullible enough to buy it, but he insisted on paying part cash. It's only about fifty thousand dollars."

Even though she was trying to hide it, he could see the greed in her twenty-one-year-old eyes. She was a *velina*, a soft hooker who survived on her good looks, roaming up and down the Riviera, living off one rich man after another, staying a few days or weeks in a villa or onboard a yacht until the current sponsor tired of her and threw her out, after which she moved on to the next.

He said, "I was thinking of driving up to San Remo and trying my luck. Have you ever been to the casino there?"

"No," she lied.

"You'd love it—it's the largest casino in Italy. All the richest people gamble there." He also happened to know that the establishment had just updated its currency verifying machines with the latest software.

He motioned to the cash, feigning frustration. "Unfortunately, I left my passport in Rome. There's no way to change this kind of money without one."

"I could change it for you," she blurted, but then checked herself. "I mean, if you want me to." When he didn't react, she said, "I have my passport right here," and reached over to her purse and produced it.

He smiled. He already knew she had a valid passport. He also knew that she had left her home in Naples at the age of sixteen, and was unknown to anyone in these parts.



TEN MINUTES LATER, they were driving up the coast, heading towards San Remo in a metallic blue Porsche cabriolet, the wind blowing through their hair. It was just before sunset. The highway ran up and down the rugged cliffs along the shore. Soon, the sky exploded into a riot of orange and indigo and violet.

Maria was excited, looking forward to a few more days of luxurious meals, plush accommodations, and expensive presents. Maybe he would buy her a diamond bracelet at the casino gift shop. Why not?



WHEN THEY REACHED SAN REMO, he surprised her again. He pulled up in front of the sidewalk that led to the casino entrance and handed her the Gucci bag. "Take that inside and convert all of it to casino chips." He motioned to the other side of the street. "I'm going to have a cup of coffee and catch up on a few business calls I have to make."

Maria was astounded that he was going to let her walk away with all that cash. When she got out of the car, he leaned over and looked up at her and smiled. "Try not to gamble it all away before I get there!"

She walked up the long sidewalk towards the casino. When the uniformed man opened the door for her, she glanced over her shoulder. Her generous friend was just sitting down at one of the tables at the cafe. He waved at her.

Maria was tempted to try and run away with the money. But she wasn't some stupid *puttana*—she knew better than to try and steal from a man like him.

Carrying the Gucci bag in one hand and feeling very chic and powerful, she went inside the busy currency exchange.

There were security cameras above each counter. Then she noticed a sign on the wall:

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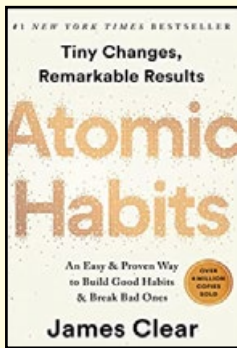
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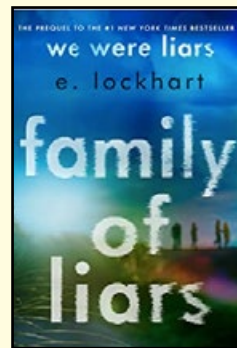
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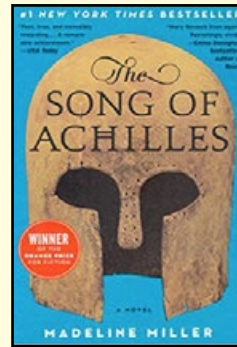
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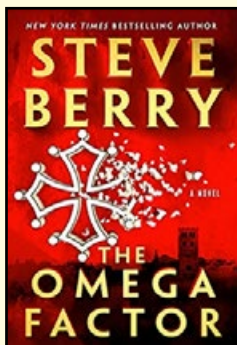
"Pretty Little Liars meets The Breakfast Club" (Entertainment Weekly) in this addictive mystery about what happens when five strangers walk into detention and only four walk out alive. On Monday, Simon died. But on Tuesday, he'd planned to post juicy reveals about all four of his high-profile classmates, which makes all four of them suspects in his murder. Or are they the perfect patsies for a killer who's still on the loose?

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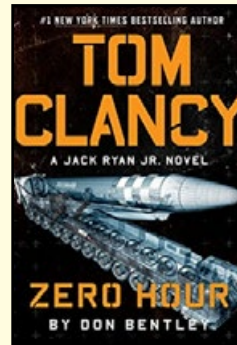
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Nicholas Lee, who works for the United Nations' Cultural Liaison and Investigative Office (CLIO). Nick's job is to protect the world's cultural artifacts.

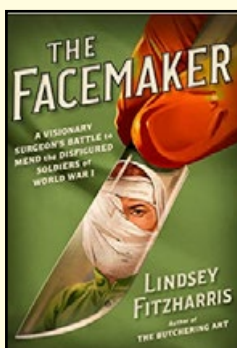
From the tranquil canals of Ghent, to the towering bastions of Carcassonne, and finally into an ancient abbey high in the French Pyrenees, Nick Lee must confront a modern-day religious crusade intent on eliminating a shocking truth from humanity's past. Success or failure—life and death—all turn on the Omega Factor.

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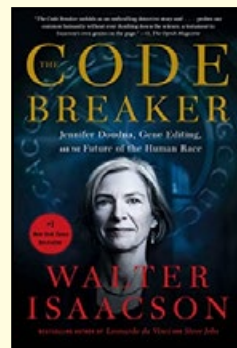
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Gillies, a Cambridge-educated New Zealander, became interested in the nascent field of plastic surgery after encountering the human wreckage on the front.

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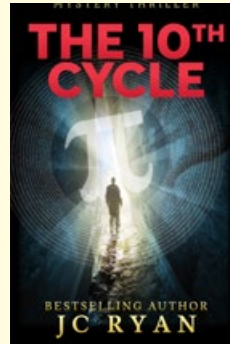
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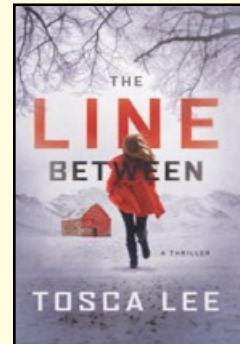
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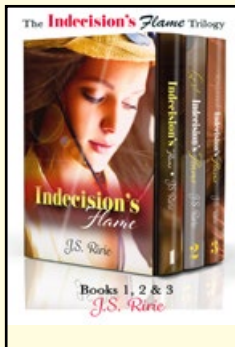
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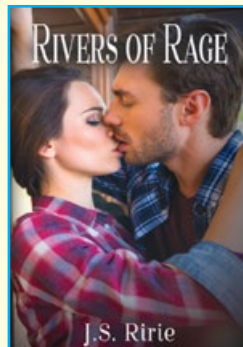
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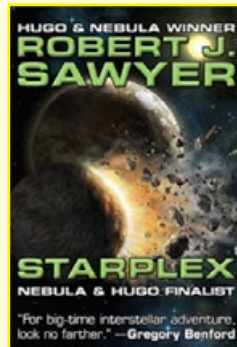
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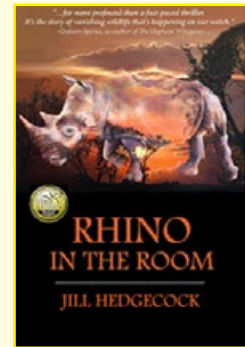
Her parents had dropped her off at a stranger's house with no intention of returning. But left with the will to survive, she embraces a new life. [Click HERE.](#)



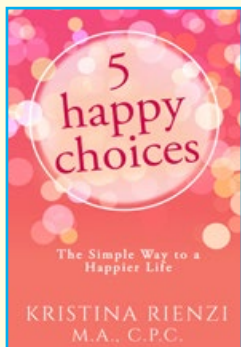
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It was meant to be a harmless stag-night prank. But a few hours later, the groom has disappeared and his friends are dead. Roy Grace is contacted to learn the truth. [Click HERE.](#)



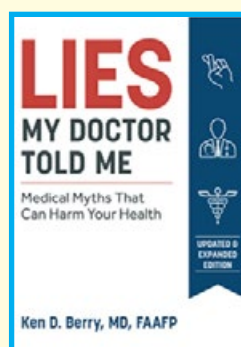
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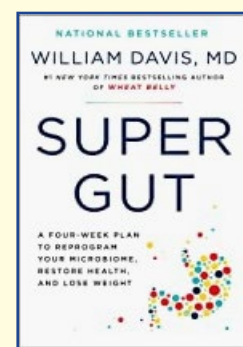
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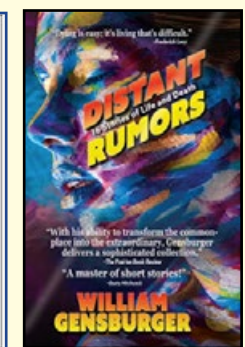
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