

Q&A

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Like anyone else, I really enjoy talking about my work. What follows are several questions that I have been asked in interviews that I thought were particularly engaging.

What inspired you to write your first book?

I wrote my first book right out of college. The manuscript is in my file cabinet. It was never published. I wrote it because books have changed my life. I have always wanted to be a writer. I believe in the power of a well-told story with compelling characters.

How did you come up with the title for your book?

I first called it The Pelican Bay Murders. A good friend suggested A Killing in Hedge Funds after reading it. I thought that would make a better subtitle so I added Deadly Portfolio.

How much of your work is realistic?

I want my work to be very realistic. The reader may need to accept a coincidence or two or a technical premise, but I do not want anything dismissed as unlikely or fantastic. I see stories on TV every week in which the plot disintegrates as soon as a common sense question is asked. When the audience is asked to accept the characters as intelligent people, it is unforgivable when one or all of them fails to consider an obvious option or explanation for what is taking place.

Do you have a specific writing style?

I hope not. Style follows rather than leads. It is the product of clarity and economy. I want the reader to understand. A well-chosen verb eliminates the need for an adverb. Good dialogue illustrates a character's personality far better than a string of adjectives. I write in the third person. I work to get my cadence, word choice, and rhythms to convey the thoughts and feelings of my characters. Someone once wrote, "Style is to be resisted." I agree.

Is there anything you find particularly challenging in your writing?

I struggle to capture and convey the feelings of the character in the moment. I want to let the reader slip into the thoughts and feelings of my characters while writing in the third person. Cadence, tempo, word choice, and phrasing are all important. I listen very closely to my prose.

Who is your favorite author and what is it that really strikes you about their work?

I read very little fiction. I prefer history. My favorite author is Shelby Foote because he has a very down-to-earth touch, an acute awareness of the ironic, and a feeling for the humanity in his tales. When I was younger, I admired Hemingway's economy but now find his themes tedious. I loved Faulkner for his humanity but his prose too entangling. I would rather write than read, so finding the time becomes a problem.

If you had to do it all over again, would you change anything in your latest book?

Hearing the reaction of my readers, I wish that I had left some scenes in the book. I cut until it hurt. As the plot became well defined, I lost awareness of how fast it was moving. I realize now that events were unfolding quickly enough so that I could have retained some amusing scenes in it. It is a very tight novel.

Where do you hope to take your writing in the future?

I want my work to be an artistic success. I am not sure how that is to be measured, but I feel certain that I could recognize a failure. I have read any number of books that were popular and economically successful but unimpressive as aesthetically. I would like to have my work catch on with folks and have people eager to see my next book come out.

What advice would you give to writers just starting out?

Strive for clarity, brevity, and flow. Write wherever you find your energy takes you. Write what is fun to write. Write every day. Never write anything carelessly, even if it is to the credit card company about an incorrect statement. Know your grammar, verb tenses, punctuation, paragraph structure, capitalization, etc. Know all the rules before you begin to break them—if you must. Our language is being tortured enough by texting, rap music, advertising, and other inanities. All that we cherish in English today will fade in time, but we do not need to hasten its demise.

Do you ever suffer from writer's block? If so, what do you do about it?

I cannot always begin where I want to begin, but I can start somewhere. No rule dictates that the story must be written in chronological order. A story consists of stepping-stones. The stones that I write first are those about which I am most excited. I can get the flow between around the major events in the story at a later time.

How did you deal with rejection letters?

I appreciate those that at least included some comment or word of encouragement. Agents and editors must not have much time to work with writers. I could not do what they do—read for a living. It is terrifying to contemplate, especially with all the mediocre stuff cranked out because of the self-publishing trend. Gatekeepers at the editor or agent level are extremely valuable, yet are being crushed under the load.

What, in your opinion, are the most important elements of good writing?

Clarity, economy and credibility. A writer needs to pack a poem, a short story, or a novel with words as if each was a piece of fine bone china that will not withstand careless handling. I write poetry as well as fiction. A poem must not have extraneous, distracting images, words, or lines. Neither should a novel. Every part supports the whole.

How do you develop your plots and characters? Do you use any set formula?

I let my feelings guide me in the creation of my characters. None of my characters is modeled after a living person. The most unattractive characters flow out of my own anger, hurt, and disappointment. The more attractive characters reflect my gratitude for the thoughtfulness and kindness others have shown me. In either, I want to strike a balance. I want my characters emerge as multi-dimensional.

I do not use a formula for my plots. When I studied painting I was taught to begin by laying down broad washes of color over all of the canvas—cover it—and then build on it. I will have a definite idea about the plot, and I will have worked out the technical concerns in advance, but I start with the broad washes—scenes that I want to have in the book. Then I let the characters develop. The plot emerges. A formula would be too confining. I have a destination in mind, but I let my characters show me how to get there. Life doesn't follow a formula. Why should a novel?

What tools do you feel are must-haves for writers?

Something that cannot be coached—imagination. The real test for an imagination is whether one can dream while he or she is still awake. Not daydream as in letting one's thoughts wander, but actually dream as in fully visualizing and hearing what is going on and exercising no control over it. If a writer doesn't have that, then the closer he or she can get to it the better. If this seems utterly out of reach, perhaps non-fiction is a better field in which to work.

How long does it take you to write a book?

About two-and-a-half years, working off and on.

What is your work schedule like when writing?

I never write when I am tired. I work at different times of the day on different days of the week because I have a busy retired life with grandchildren and other interests. The morning is better for me. Some writers rise early every day and write for a couple of hours. I admire their discipline. I put my life together each day the same way I do my plots—going from one urgent or enjoyable matter to the next.

What are your current projects?

I am in the early stages of a coming-of-age novel that focuses on the 1940's and 1950's. I continue to write poetry. I am also actively considering a sequel to Deadly Portfolio based upon the gratifying critical acceptance the book has received.

What is the last book you read?

Velocity, by Koontz. Jeb Stuart: The last Cavalier by Burke Davis. The Broker by John Grisham.

If you could be any character in fiction, who would you be?

I am very fond of Dicken's Fezzywig. I actually played Elwood P. Dowd in an amateur production of "Harvey." I enjoyed being him.

Tell us about one of your worst habit or quality?

I am also addicted to solitaire on the computer—so mindless. I am a procrastinator.

How do you tackle stress and define stress?

Stress is a frustration at what I am trying to achieve. I do a lot of unproductive things in dealing with it, profanity being the most immediate and satisfying. I whine in the hope others will show me some sympathy. Nobody ever responds.

I manage stress by staying physically fit and maintaining my weight, getting my sleep, and letting others love me.

What would I find in your refrigerator right now?

A wonderful old poem, *Living in Love*, from a *Celestial Tea* box extolling the joys of two persons living in love. My wife taped it there more than 20 years ago during which time we have moved three times and traded out refrigerators at least as often. Then also there are pictures drawn by my grandchildren and step-grandchildren, which make me, wish with all my heart that they will find the world a kind and caring place. Finally, there is a note pad and pen because I am always running around looking for something to write down a number.