

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

ALLAN RETZKY

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF, HOW AND WHEN YOU STARTED WRITING.

In some ways I've always written, although without any idea beyond getting some thoughts down. When I was at engineering school in the 1950's, I fell in love with the poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and sketched out short poems in his style. The simplicity of the style is what attracted me. I also remember reading John Dos Passos and Hemingway in my teens...also attracted by the simplicity.

During a long career in international business there was lots of down time in foreign airports, or being wide awake with jet lag in distant hotels. I would often use this time to sketch out ideas from snippets of conversation I heard or places I wished to describe.

All this meant nothing until I stopped working and decided why not look into writing. Why not get some training? I took classes at the Writers Studio in lower Manhattan for a while, and then applied to Southampton College's Creative Writing MFA program. I was probably the oldest. I learned from a solid faculty of published authors (Kaylie Jones, Indira Ganeson, Matt Klam, Clark Blaise, Lou Ann Walker, Ursula Hegi, Jules Feiffer, John Westerman, Bharti Mukherjee and Roger Rosenblatt).

After the first few courses I was hooked. It took a bit longer to appreciate the value of rewriting!

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL?

I've been interested for some time in human flaws and /or weaknesses. I'm not talking about evil. Sociopathic behavior is another thing. So what exposes human flaws? I imagine certain flaws become active when outside circumstances conspire to set them up. In this case I observed a woman trying to pick up a man on the bus I usually take from Manhattan to the Hamptons. That's where it started. I used the classic "what if" premise to create circumstances that would make him susceptible to her flattery. And that's how it got going.

HOW DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO ENRICH YOUR STORY?

I was in the international trading business for many years and that provided Amos Posner with enough detail to fill out a good part of his backstory.

IS THERE ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

My trading background for sure. Also my house is very much like the one in the story (why reinvent another house?). My father died when I was young and it gave me incentive to succeed like Posner. And like Posner I am interested in architecture (an almost alternate career choice). I can also be quiet like him. Or is it the other way around?

ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

Not consciously, but characters are often an amalgam of people we've met or even relatives.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR NOVEL IS MORE PLOT DRIVEN OR CHARACTER DRIVEN?

Plot driven at the start... My method is simple and very unoriginal. I have an idea for a story. That's all. I write an early chapter or part thereof and necessarily include one or two characters to fit the idea. After that I let the characters take over. Their backstory actually gets filled in along the way which obviously necessitates going back to change things from earlier chapters. The characters definitely lead the plot into the next scene, but the plot is basic. It's the outline. The part I like most about this approach is that I'm the one who discovers what happens next.

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE OR MOST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER?

I like Wisdom. He's good at his job and he's not a prototypical fiction cop who drinks and fools around. Note I also made him quite human in his attraction to Heidi's sister, yet gave him the resolve to avoid a problem. I also like the sister Brigid. She's very human and very tough.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER?

Heidi is far and away the least sympathetic. She's a natural predator. My one attempt to show her more human side isn't enough to compensate for her other failings

HOW DID YOU SEE AMOS POSNER?

He's mostly a sad character, yet in a way he also could be everyman. His flaws are actually common and rather universal. Some male readers may identify with some of the issues he faces, at least I hope so.

WHAT PART OF WRITING YOUR BOOK DID YOU FIND THE MOST CHALLENGING?

Ending it with a twist... I have read many books where I cared for the plot and characters and then felt dissatisfied with the ending. Perhaps I'll recommend a writing class in "ending the novel." There's no shortage of writing classes on "starting the novel".

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM YOUR BOOK?

I'm not reinventing the wheel here. First and foremost is a good read. If someone wants to go deeper they might find the exposure of character flaws an interesting avenue to explore.

HOW DO YOU DIAL UP THE TENSION TO KEEP YOUR READERS ON THE EDGE OF THEIR SEATS?

I try to end each scene (chapter) with an unanswered issue. If I do it right they'll ask, "What comes next?"

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

I'll go back and start with Ray Bradbury ("The Martian Chronicles"). In more recent adult years I enjoyed Lawrence Sanders ("The First Deadly Sin"), Nobelist Jose Saramago (various works), Ian McEwan (various), Ann Patchett ("Bel Canto").

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

Frustrating fun. Early on I thought all you needed to do was dash off your ideas on paper and then it's all over. Then my work got critically read by others and it all changed. Thanks to author Ursula Hegi in particular I now take great pleasure in reviewing and rewriting. I also need to do it every day, or else I get antsy.

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

Write what's in your gut, no matter how extreme it might read. If you're lucky a small percentage will be really good. Point being that one should take chances.

WHAT IS THE WORST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

Outline the whole story before you start. Enough said. This approach does not help me in the creative process.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? ANY NEW BOOKS IN THE PIPELINE?

A few more ideas set in the Hamptons. I'm trying to bring back Detective Wisdom. He's a likeable character who keeps things moving without being at the center of things.

ANY FINAL WORDS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY ABOUT YOURSELF, YOUR NOVEL, OR LIFE IN GENERAL?

Many people feel they have a book inside them, either novel or memoir. They should write it as a life goal.

ALSO: HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN TERMS OF GENERAL INTERESTS?

I have always had many interests. In times past I've been seriously interested in astronomy, architecture, and archaeology. I was a half-decent sculptor and like to cook. I also enjoyed the commercial challenges associated with international business. I don't enjoy following world affairs and politics like I used to. Some things never seem to change. Like human behavior. You wake up every day to wars and poverty. When I write I escape from reality as much as the reader wants to.