

Biography

I really can't remember a time when I wasn't thinking of stories, then writing them. When I was seven my oldest brother got a portable typewriter for his Bar Mitzvah. I was transfixed by it. I'd sneak into his room and use it. And I read everything on the bookshelves of my two very smart older siblings.

When I was 15, I sent a short story to the *New Yorker*. (I kept the rejection letter, on their letterhead no less, for years.) I wrote my first film script the next year.

After studying English literature at University of Toronto, I took a year off to drive cab (my *Razor's Edge* phase), hang out and write a book. I drove, I partied, I went to Europe and I think wrote a line or two in a journal. At law school I spent most of my time in the free legal clinic, doing criminal cases, rarely going to class, reading as many non-law books as I could.

After I was called to the bar, desperate to get out of Toronto – and avoid being a lawyer - I went to the London School of Economics to get a masters degree in International Law, and managed to travel all over Europe on various scholarships. (Here I am in the Sinai Desert).

Back in Canada, I finished my bar exams and nine days later hopped on a plane to Paris, where I became the managing editor of an English-language magazine, *Passion, The Magazine of Paris*. I turned 30 there, living in a tiny basement apartment, working insane hours, with almost no money – a recurring theme in my life.

I had this plan to start a magazine in Toronto, came home and, with a terrific partner, created and published *T.O. The Magazine of Toronto*. (This is one of my favourite covers.) Six years of ridiculously hard work, and, once again, very little money, ensued. We folded T.O. in 1988. I was broke, unemployed. Not a great time.

I had a job offer in New York at *Newsweek*, but it was time to stop uprooting my life. I worked for a year as a film executive – hated it - then spent as year a producer at CBC Radio – not a good fit.

With our first child on the way and broke yet again, I rewrote my law exams, put \$3,000 on my Visa card, rented a closet in a friend's law chambers, hung up some posters from Paris, and started my criminal law practice. I was 37 and starting all over, yet again. (I've now practiced for 23 years with my associate Alvin Shidlowksi and am very proud of our firm, Rotenberg, Shidlowksi & Jesin. Here's our website: www.rsjlaw.ca, get a hold of us if your crazy aunt or uncle gets arrested.)

And I started to write. I wrote another film script. I wrote a novel. My wife's best friend married a then-struggling young writer, Douglas Preston. We became friends and, as Doug's career took off, I read his stuff and he read mine.

My first book was good enough to get me an agent in New York. But not good enough. The day I was told it hadn't sold, I immediately started *Old City Hall*. It was 2001. By 2004, I'd hit a wall, with the novel half done. I took a nine-day writing course at Humber College and worked with two talented writers, David Bezmozgis and Michelle Berry, who were most generous with their time. (And where I now teach as part of their correspondence course.)

I finished the book in April 2007. Doug read it and, determined to hook me up with a top agent, introduced me to Victoria Skurnick at Levine Greenberg Literary Agency in New York. She read the book overnight, and the next day signed me up. Magic. Victoria is a wonder. Within weeks she'd drummed up a bidding war and soon we had sales in more than twenty countries in all sorts of foreign languages, including French, Italian, German, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Hebrew and Japanese, and an audio book deal.

I'm still practicing criminal law, raising our kids, and, thankfully, writing every moment I can.

FAQ

Question 1: How do you find time to write?

A. I'm a criminal lawyer, my wife works full time as a television news producer, and we have three kids, so my usual response to this question is: What were you doing at five this morning? Here are a few tips:

1. Set your alarm for five a.m. (Note: I mean it.)
2. The Morning. Avoid the newspaper – and email. The cliché is you have to write every day. It's like exercise – stop and you lose your muscle tone. So best to start early in the day.
3. Kids' Programs. Once out of diapers, kids provide a great writing opportunity – a swim lesson is a good hour, drama class is two. I've even written at my oldest son's hockey games. I tap away when he's not on the ice.
4. Mind-numbing tasks. Raking leaves, shoveling snow, chopping wood, digging ditches. Great stuff. You need time to let your mind ramble. Agatha Christie said she got her best ideas while doing the dishes.
5. Trains, Boats and Planes. I've often take the train to New York, a 12-hour milk run from Toronto. Bliss. Lucky Scott Turow - I understand he commutes by train to his law office in Chicago. Perfect writing time.
6. Lunch. Arrive late, when the restaurant is emptying out. Find a plug. Get in an hour before heading back to the madhouse. (Note: Avoid your pals. You really want to be a writer? Get used to eating alone.)
7. Find Those Half Hours. I call them the margin times. Five o'clock Saturday afternoon, nine o'clock on Sunday night when everyone else is watching *Downton Abbey*.
8. Most Important: Never take time from your clients, your friends and especially your family. Write on your own time. (Note: charge up your laptop every night)

Question 2: Where do you write?

A. Where do I not write is probably a better question. When I'm at home I tend to wander around. Out in the world, I write in noisy coffee shops, at the back of crowded courtrooms, in half-empty restaurants. I also carry copy with me, so when I can't plug in, I can edit. Editing is a good three-quarters of the job. And I have my law office, where I both write and meet clients.

Question 3: Do you plot everything out before you write?

Answer: I wish. For some reason my brain just doesn't work that way. I usually start with the opening chapter. Then all these characters keep coming on the stage and stumble around trying to find out what happened. I follow. At some point I try to get ahead of them. Plot is the hardest part of writing. I think that's why so many people have half a novel in a drawer.

Question 4: Will the same characters be in your next book?

Answer: Yes, but not in a conventional sense. This will be quite a long series. But if you've read any of my novels, you know I don't write typical legal thriller. I have an ensemble cast, and it keeps growing. Which is a lot of fun. The books will work standing alone, but there's a line through all of them. I just have to keep drawing it.

Question 5: What's your favourite part of all this?

Answer: After my first book came out, I got a call from a reader in England. She wanted to talk about the scene with Detective Greene and his father in Greene's snowbound car. Suddenly she paused. There was a catch in her voice. "I was so moved," she said. "It reminded me of a time I had with my mother before she died." All I could think was: even across an ocean, with someone I didn't know, how wonderful and powerful words can be. It's all about the words. Their strange and infinite magic.

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