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MARCH-APRIL 2018 ISSUE

PUBLISHER NOTES

Welcome back to another issue of Books 'N Pieces Magazine. It seems like everything changes with each issue; a challenge because creating a solid publication that is worthy of your time is not always easy. In this regard we are very fortunate that we have interviews with established authors, many best sellers, as well as newer authors, both represented and self-published, or periodically, one of the Alt. Publish represented authors.

In this issue, jam-packed, we have four author interviews: Eileen Cook and KJ Howe, both thriller authors garnering a lot of attention; part two of the interview with travel writer Kurt Koontz about his journey to India and how that experience will become his next book; and newcomer, romance writer, Ashley Adams and her new series of sci-fi romance (sample included). We've also got an intriguing short story by Peter Ford that will make you check to see who may be watching you, and FREE days, giveaways, a book review by columnist Jill Hedgecock, and more fun things.

As part of our expansion, BNP Magazine will come out every two months, offering you both digital and print formats. Our goal is to offer readers some regular columns, such as

book reviews, tips, writing instruments, tech-gear and so on. If you are interested in becoming a regular contributor, please contact me.

Enjoy this issue. I enjoyed reading it. And do sign up for our mailing list from our Website at www.BooksNPieces.com.

William Gensburger

Publisher/Writer

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INTERVIEW

EILEEN COOK

Eileen Cook was born in a small town in Michigan, but would go on to live in Boston and Belgium, before settling down in Vancouver, Canada. Her first novel was published in 2008. Entertainment Weekly called her novel [WITH MALICE](#) a “seriously creepy thriller” which pretty much made her entire year, she reveals in her bio. Her new book, [THE HANGING GIRL](#) is now available.

- *The Hanging Girl is a sequel to With Malice, yet is a standalone novel. How does that work?*

The Hanging Girl is a standalone novel. There is a reference, or “Easter Egg,” for people who have read With Malice. I enjoy doing stand alone books, but I can’t resist the chance to mention a previous book or have a small cross over, that's fun for those who have read my previous books.

- Your debut thriller *With Malice* brought you to the attention of fans. I'm guessing that it was not a Houghton Mifflin imprint at first, although it has become one with HM representing your new book.

With Malice was always a HMH imprint. I had done a series of young-adult novels with Simon and Schuster, but when I made the change to a new genre, it seemed a good opportunity to change publisher and try a new approach.

- How did that come about and what was the initial process of getting published like for you?

Ah, the process of being published—the chance to practice persistence and delusion all at the same time. I've always been a writer. For years I had a million half-completed novels, but eventually I decided that I had to finish one. When I did I was convinced it was brilliant and I sent it off to every agent and publisher in the known world. Unfortunately, the agents and editors didn't agree with my estimate of my writing skills. I went on to write four more completed manuscripts before finally selling my first book in 2006. (Please note that I'm making this sound like a total of five completed manuscripts with hundreds of rejections was no big deal, but there were a lot of tears and threats to quit contained in that time.) I've gone on to do a number of books now, and feel fortunate to still be in the publishing game after all this time.

I was fortunate enough to have the amazing Ivan Coyote (Canadian writer and storyteller) as a writing instructor years ago. After class one day she pulled me aside and encouraged me to keep submitting and trying for publication. I admitted I was afraid of more rejection. She gave me some of the best advice I'd ever received: "*Here's the thing, Eileen. You're all ready not published. The worst thing that will happen to you is that you still won't be published.*" That was my *aha* moment. I realized that what I was risking was rejection, nothing more. I decided I could face a few (hundreds) of no's. I haven't looked back since.

- [What attracted you to the thriller genre?](#)

I adore reading thrillers so it didn't surprise me that I wanted to take a turn at writing them. I worked for years as a counsellor and what drew me to that profession was wanting to understand how people make the choices they do in their life, in particular, in difficult situations. Writing thrillers gives me the chance to explore how people navigate complicated situations. I enjoy attempting to twist readers expectations, to take them in one direction and then hopefully, pull the rug out from under them, all without "cheating" so that when they re-read the pages they realize the truth had been there the entire time.

- [Your second grade teacher knew you would be an author. What gave her that idea?](#)

In second grade we had an assignment to cut a picture out of a magazine and then write several sentences about the picture. Most of the kids were doing things like: The man has a blue shirt. The pie is apple. I was the only person to link my sentences together so that they made a story. I was always the kid in the back of the room holding court, retelling fairy tales I'd heard from my grandparents, or taking a story we'd heard in class and spinning new endings. I believe she recognized in me a love for books and story.

Or she was psychic. That's also a possibility.

- [At what point did you know that you had made it as a pro-writer?](#)

This question made me laugh as I'm not certain that I think I've "made it," this despite the fact that writing is now my full-time job. Most recently, when I had to submit my passport renewal and had to list my occupation, I paused before listing writer. I half-expected homeland security to swoop down on me. The truth is that there's always more to learn about writing. Just as soon as I think I have it all figured out, I learn something new. I don't know if I will ever feel as if I've "arrived" as much as I feel like I have more to learn, and more areas that need growth.

- How did you get noticed by Entertainment Weekly?

I have no idea. My best guess is that the publicist at HMH had been able to attract their attention. I was out a dinner when a friend called to tell me that she was reading the magazine and saw my book listed inside. I immediately paid my bill, and rushed to the grocery store where I cleaned out their stock of the magazines—buying every single copy they had. I'm fairly sure the clerk thought I was insane, or possibly a hoarder.

- You wrote in the introduction to *The Hanging Girl*, "When I talk to people, I size them up. I listen to what they say and, more important, to what they don't." Writers have been described as watchers, more than people that directly affect the world. Would you agree with that assessment, and if not why not?

I would agree 100%! Every writer I know is a bit of a voyeur. We listen in on conversations in restaurants and coffee shops. As we walk by homes we peek in the windows as we pass, and we're always watching people wondering what their story might be. Writers are fascinated by people—it's a bit compulsive. When I was writing *The Hanging Girl*, I was struck by how those people who fake psychic abilities, and those who spin stories, have a lot in common!

- Did you really learn to read Tarot cards when writing the book?

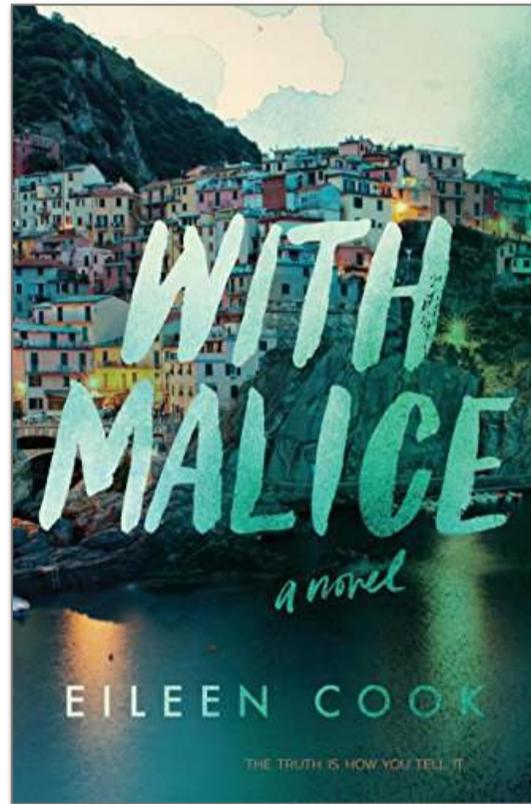
I did! One of the things I enjoy best about the writing process is the chance to do research. I love learning things. Sometimes this can become a procrastination technique (I also can spend hours on social media) However, in this case I felt if I was going to write a character who read tarot then I felt it was something that I needed to understand. Especially because reading the future was so important to Skye and her mom. I wouldn't say I'm very good at it- but I did like learning about the history of tarot and the meanings of different cards.

You can find Eileen at one of these social media spots. Be sure to visit her Website at <https://www.eileencook.com>, and let her know you read her interview in Books 'N Pieces Magazine.

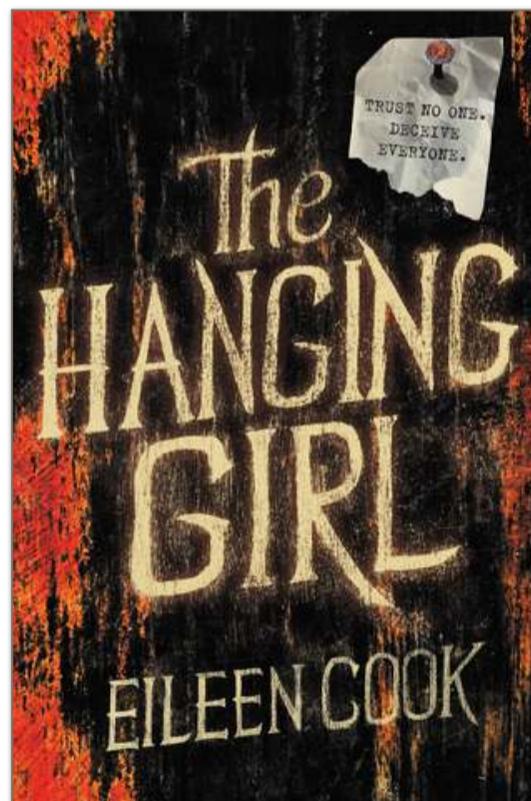
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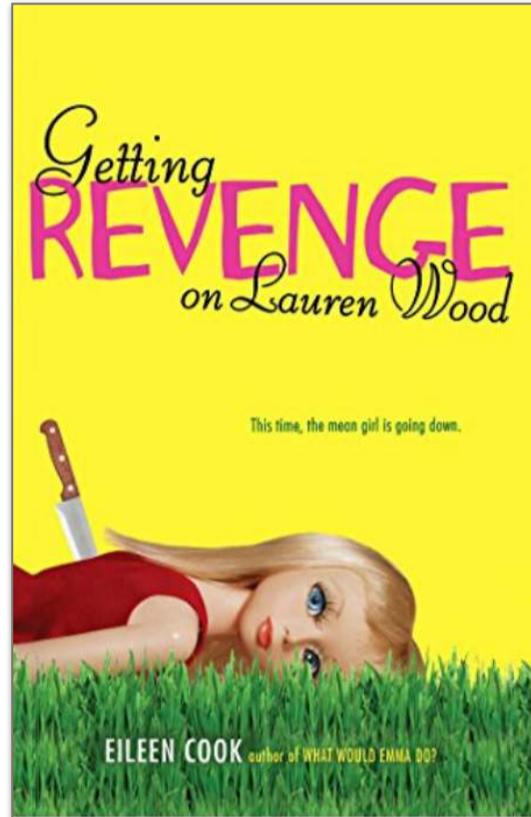


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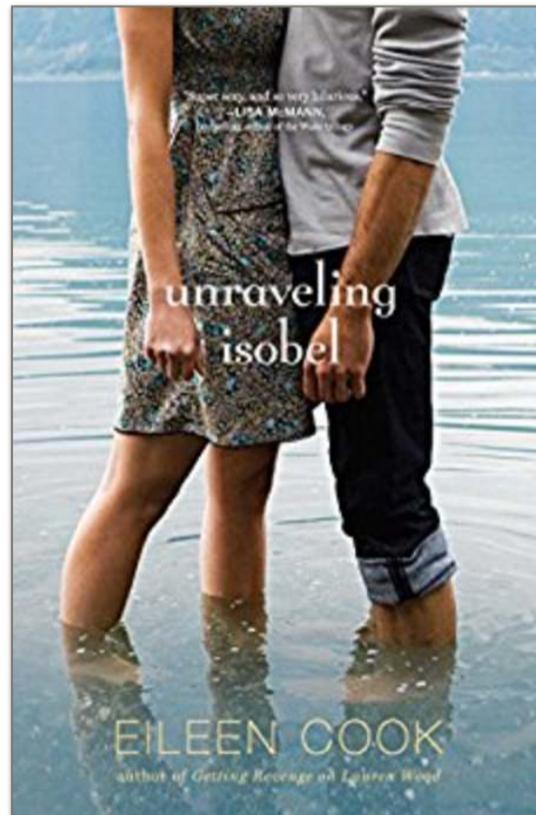


and [THE HANGING GIRL](#) by Eileen Cook

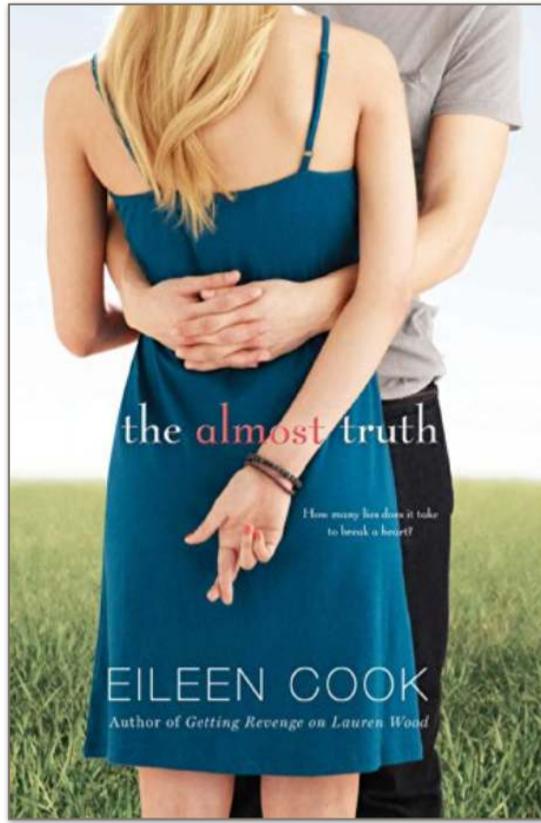
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A SHORT STORY BY PETER FORD

PRIDE & PREJUDICE

I spend a lot of time in tube stations. I suppose that in itself is unremarkable; much of London can claim the very same thing. To be in such close confines with countless unknown persons can be a daunting prospect to many, one to shy away from, to avoid at all costs. But not me, I see it as an opportunity. On the train or platform I select someone at random, and then I watch them. Through the shoulders of fellow commuters, behind the veil of the Metro or Evening Standard, I watch and I guess; what do they do? What are their hobbies? How do they dress at the weekend? When was the last time they had sex? Nothing remarkable, nothing out of the ordinary at any rate, but my answers satisfy me and through the course of our interaction I build a picture of them in my mind, which for all my own intents and purposes is real. As I change at Whitechapel or Shepard's Bush, Brixton or Turnpike Lane, I identify a new target for my surveillance and the process begins again.

I am sure this is a common pastime, certain in fact. For me it seems like the most natural thing in the world to watch your fellow man or woman, and to think, long and hard, about them. They are all so similar to me, to you, to each other, and yet so profoundly different in every conceivable way. It is Fate herself, in all her infinite wisdom, who has placed us on the same train at the same time. Those who do not entertain such thoughts, those who bury their head in the paper or watch their laces are, in this writer's humble opinion, missing out on a fundamental part of being human.

Have you ever seen a man with a bag and wondered what was in it? Or a woman wearing sunglasses and thought about the color and shape of her eyes? Blue, green, hazel; round,

almond, the possibilities are fantastic. I paint her eyes with my mind; I place the bottle of scotch and dirty magazines in his bag. I am a humble creator, filling in the gaps which are hidden from view. Surely, if one did not do this, if one did not carry out such simple creating, then you would simply go mad. Mad at the unknowing, at the realization that you live within a world of which you know nothing.

I must confess it took me a couple of glances before I recognized the tragic beauty of what I was witnessing. I had just stepped out of the bookshop which lies in one of the subterranean streets which descend from Old Street roundabout down to the tube station itself. I had just bought a new book, but that fact in of itself is not important. It was mid-afternoon and a steady stream of people had begun to descend into the station. None were remarkable and I headed towards the barriers on the hunt for an interesting character to follow. It was as I was considering which direction I should pursue when I noticed a flurry of movement in the periphery of my vision. At first, I ignored it, I left my glasses at home so I am used to things occurring in the blurred edges of my sight, such things which I usually find the most interesting. I walked on, but then the blur was accompanied by a noise, a noise, which does not fit the description of a wail, a cry or a shout. It was just noise, I turned my head and the scene, and a half-minute Shakespearean tragedy came into focus. That is where I first met Elizabeth, and first met Darcy.

They were not the most attractive couple, no, forgive me, as they are no longer a couple, I shall not describe them as such, but rather two independent, sentient beings. She, Elizabeth, as I named her, was taller, aided by her black heeled shoes which she seemed to plant in the concrete floor of the station with a certain amount of menace. She wore the grey pencil skirt and jacket that was the uniform of the female office worker; if Lowry had been alive today, than I fear his factory workers painting would be outside Bank and not the mills of the north. I digress. She wore a thin, beige mac with an expensive looking brown handbag over her left shoulder. Her face betrayed her as one of those unfortunate women who go red-faced at anything; a flight of stairs, a minimal heat wave, and now her cheeks

were flushed a bright pink and her neck was blotchy between rose patches and pale skin, made so even more unfortunate as her hair was red tied in a bun behind her head.

He, Darcy, was shorter, his face less expressive, more sullen. He wore his own uniform, blue suit, expensive tailoring by its cut, white shirt red tie. Again, Lowry, wasted on the north. His face was plump and clean shaven, well-tanned, with short blond hair around his ears and a longer fringe at the top. He had a large, brown satchel with a thick strap, the kind you could imagine bike messenger carrying as he hurtled down London's streets.

"You said it was the last time." Every syllable she pronounced had a deeper, unspoken meaning. Her voice wavering, faltering. In contrast, his face was completely passive, as if he were in the queue at the bank. His eyes, dark specs sunken beneath light brows, seemed alert however, looking intensely at the space around her, though never actually at her.

"And it was." His voice was small, a whisper. She towered over him, maybe that was my perspective, watching as I was from a little way away whilst the river of commuters flowed past. Her eyes streamed, the parts of her neck and face which went pink were quickly becoming so. She chewed her lip as if it was her dinner, and I chewed mine with equal vigor.

"Do not lie to me." It was a snarl, like an animal. It was incredible the contempt that she was able to place within those five words; she pitied him and loathed him, loved him and despised him. It was obvious; every fibre of her existence, tangible and intangible screamed it to all who passed them by. And yet, it was only me who heard her, who heard her disappointment in this man, and who heard the sullen silence of his response. I was hooked. Like a fish on a line, a bear in a trap, a rat in a cage, I watched on.

"Babe." He reached out with his hand, touching her elbow. A desperate act from a desperate man. She slapped it away as one would an insect.

"Don't call me that." A man walking past looked, looked right at them, but then carried on walking. Why? Was he embarrassed? For them? For himself? I did not have time to consider my fellow viewer, if they left early than that was their problem. Darcy withdrew his hand and looked at his feet for a time, patent leather shoes, fashionable, expensive-looking

I thought, like the rest of his ensemble. Not to my taste certainly, though I suppose we run in rather different circles.

“Look, I promise you.” He reached out again, but in a more conciliatory fashion, palm up in the space between them. A classic maneuver, I would have applauded him if not for what happened next. She looked down at his hand and her shoulders relaxed, she pursed her lips into something that one (though not me) might consider to be a smile.

His phone rang. It was a tinny, 90’s style jingle that you might hear in a novelty greeting card, echoing from the top pocket of his blazer. As the melody begin, his entire existence seemed to sag, seemed to be sucked down through the floor and to the platforms below. Her face scrunched up as if something that had died a long time ago had been dropped in front of her.

“Who. Is. That?” Each word lasted a lifetime. My mouth hung open, blind to everything else about Darcy, Elizabeth and the tinny jingle of the early Nokia’s. He was defeated, exhausted, reaching into his pocket with his last strength he brought the phone out into the gulf that now seemed to grow between them. It was an old phone, not touch-screen, one your grandmother might have for once a week texts, not exactly in-keeping with the rest of his get-up. I saw him press the button to unlock it and they both looked down at the screen. How I wished I could be there alongside them. To see what was written, to feel what she felt or he felt. To smell the sulphur of her fury, taste the bitterness of his defeat. After a moment, and with unprecedented violence, her hand whipped up and slapped her bag producing a whiplash sound reverberating around the station. She snapped her head away from the phone and from him and, as if, fated, her eyes met mine. Like staring at each other through a tunnel, the world seemed it descend even further into the periphery and I saw the heavy mascara on her top eyelashes, lighter on the bottom, I could see the freshly shaped eyebrows pressing together in a gathering frown. I could see her eyes, the tears welling up within them, the blood vessels stark and strident against the white of the pupils. As we stared through this tunnel, I saw her face organize itself into one of anger, her teeth clenched, eyebrows forced together. Whether this anger was directed at Darcy for the

phone-call, or at me, the witness to it, I could not tell, and I was forced, against all my instincts, to tear myself away from the stage and allow myself to melt into the human traffic of the station.

That evening I sat on the tube as it rattled down the Northern line; Kennington, Elephant & Castle, The Claphams, the names so familiar I felt as though they are part of my family. People got off, and they got on. It was a Friday evening, always an interesting time as those leaving the office late mingle with those going out early. Like two watercolors seeping into one another, each one better off by the others' presence. On previous Friday's I would watch enthralled as nervous teenagers headed out on first dates, groups of twenty-somethings, already pissed, chanted as they drunk warm cider from yellow cans. I find such persons interesting to an extent; where are they going? What drugs will they tonight? Who will end up sleeping with who? All such questions are speculative, enjoyable, but hypothetical, not as fulfilling as some others. I prefer a slightly older crowd, such as the woman in the black dress on a summer's day; is she mourning for a lost love, or, is it simply laundry day? Or the elderly couple sat next to each other saying nothing; happy in their silence, or nothing left to say to one another?

This Friday was different. Elizabeth's words, in that scratchy voice, echoed round my mind, and Darcy's sullen, vacant expression as she gesticulated under his bowed head seemed to be everywhere I looked. Every time I tried to watch another person, to create their lives for them, I always returned to Old Street, to Elizabeth as she slapped away Darcy's olive branch of a hand, and the ringing mobile in his pocket, the way his expression did not change but his shoulders sagged when he looked at the screen, the way Elizabeth shook in head in what, disgust? Outrage? Pity?

Impossible to say.

So many questions have emerged from this, so many loose ends I cannot seem to connect or forget in my mind. On the train, as it limped towards Morden someone started singing, what was her favorite song I thought immediately? But it was Elizabeth, and not the

singing woman on the train I thought of, was she into electronic, or jazz, perhaps she didn't like music at all, perhaps she preferred literature, or films, or wood-craft, or S&M, the list was so endless I shut my eyes and covered my head in my hands. Deep within my heart I felt a profound emptiness, like nothing I had felt before, like a piece was now missing and in its place sat something hard and cold. What was the story? I was no longer satisfied to be the observer, the passive audience member, I needed to know the story, I needed the closure on it.

As I lay in bed that night, I could not sleep. This is not unusual for me so please do not worry, I am often content to stare up at the damp ceiling, lit by a beam of oblong light from the street-lamp right outside my window. This night however, I was not content. I could not make myself comfortable, I tried crossing my ankles left over right, then right over left, tried rest my hands by my side and then clamped over my chest like a knight's tomb. Nothing worked. It was as if over the course of the day I had forgotten how to be comfortable, forgotten how to sleep.

But of course, I had not forgotten, even an insomniac does not forget how to sleep. No, I was restless because of the questions. They made my mind race as I relived every word of their final, desperate conversation, recalling the anguished look on Elizabeth's face as Darcy received the text, the sound her leather bag made as she slapped it with the palm of her hand. With a memory like mine there is no need for television, and the imagined reality it so artfully creates has satisfied me until now.

After giving up on sleep I took some paper from my drawer and a pen from the floor and sat down at the desk. I thought for a moment and then began to write in the small, cramped handwriting my teachers despised me for. My words were hurried little things, scratches on the page, occasionally I would look up, replay an extract of the break up in my mind's eye; slow it down and zoom in before returning to the paper. After some time I reached for my glasses from the bedside table and the words I had written came into focus. Seven questions. Questions I wanted to know the answer to, answers I needed to fill this longing within me that I, no, that they had created, so that I could complete the story.

For the longest time, the majority of my waking life in fact, the fictional back stories I provided for my targets had been sufficient to satisfy my desperate, though hitherto unacknowledged, need for closure. Old Street changed all that, Elizabeth and Darcy changed all that.

I sat at the bus stop the next day in a gloomy, lethargic state. The red double-deckers came and went but I remained sat, hands on knees, back straight against the glass of the shelter, the list of questions in my pocket. I felt as if something had given way within me, the blissful fiction within which I had lived my life until then was no more, I knew that from now on I could no longer be satisfied with these fictional truths I had invented throughout my life. They had defended me, shielded me from the horrors and tragedy of real life but no more. I had to know the answer to Elizabeth's and Darcy's break-up, nothing else mattered anymore, the sight of strangers on the tube, once so mysterious, so tantalizing now seemed little more than mannequins or cardboard cut-outs, hollow and two-dimensional, holding nothing more for me than a handful of sand.

I understand now that the new game I devised was as destructive and socially unacceptable as the last, though at the time it seemed to me the most natural course of action to take. My logic was flawless. Old Station represented part of the commute of one, potentially both of our protagonists. As far as their clothes and mannerisms suggested I then worked on the assumption that they were some sort of office worker; a lawyer, an accountant, financier, so the hours of nine-five, eight-six were highly plausible. It seemed to me so simple what I would have to do, a stakeout.

If you are not familiar with the layout of Old Street Station, allow me to provide a brief overview. There are four entrances from four different sides of Old Street roundabout. To attempt to watch from even an elevated vantage point of the roundabout would be ill-advised, too many people at rush hour, too slanted a view. I briefly toyed with the idea of setting up a series of hidden cameras at each entrance, the streams all playing at a 'safe house' nearby. I had used cameras on a lesser project before, but the capital required to pull

something like this off was, I decided after checking my finances, was well beyond my meagre means. The only option, therefore, would be to watch from within the station itself, from a position with a clear line of sight to the barriers.

Hours soon turned to days, and my vigil changed from being concentrated at rush hour to being an all-day affair. Conscious that an eagle-eyed employee of one of the numerous subterranean shops in the station might start asking questions, I bought an old, oversized duffel coat and tattered beanie and sat, cross legged in the threshold of a deserted shop front. A homeless man, clearly suspecting that I was intruding on his patch, came over to me and growled through a wicker-like ginger beard; what are you doing here? I replied rather more curtly than I usually do I am waiting for someone. He shrugged, aren't we all, he muttered repeatedly whilst returning to his own strip of cardboard by the Kings' Road entrance.

I saw Darcy again on a Thursday evening. I do not remember which Thursday or even how long into my stakeout this had been as I had taken to sleeping in the station as well. I was almost dozing, my right eye had closed and left going that way. Somewhere above my head a car screeched to a halt followed by a staccato of angry yells. I awoke with a start, and realized that I had begun to drool between the thick clumps of hair that had sprouted from my chin and cheeks. Alas, my facial hair grew in islands, with perfectly smooth canals in between. Beyond embarrassment, I did not bother to wipe the drool off my chin before surveying the station. An elderly couple, withered arm in withered arm made their way through the barriers. Unremarkable. A woman in leggings marched her dog through the underpass. Downright dull. And then, as I almost departed back to sleep, Darcy took to the stage.

As I saw him descend from the world above, I felt this void, heavy and immovable, which had been sat atop my chest suddenly, lift, and I felt almost euphoric in a mixture of relief and expectation. He was more casually dressed than before, like a Friday at the office or a Sunday lunch with the upper-class in-laws.

It had never been my intention to assign guilt to what had happened between Elizabeth and Darcy, I am merely an audience member robbed of a conclusion to a story, I would be willing to accept any conclusion given to me. Despite this impartiality, I could not help but feel an overwhelming pity for dear Darcy, who appeared genuinely troubled, both physically and mentally (and possibly spiritually, though I feel it is not my place to say). His eyes were now merely specks within heavy, bruised-looking bags, his hair, once so neatly trimmed, now hung over his ears and down the back of his neck in a tangled mess. Unlike my own facial hair, his northern European genes had permitted a more consistent beard, auburn in colour, to spread over the bottom half of his face. It seemed to me that he was hungover on the relationship, cold turkey on it. He was carrying the same leather satchel as he had been before, the strap high across his chest, the satchel itself pinned to his side with his left arm over it, as if its contents were explosive. For a moment he did nothing, looking lost and scared in the void of the station. As I staggered to my feet, allowing shreds of newspaper and empty beer cans to fall to the floor, my eyes fixed upon his pale face, I can honestly say that I have never before felt more connected to a human being. I wanted to go to him, like a mysterious Dickensian benefactor, place my arm on his shoulder and say tell me everything. But I couldn't, so I didn't, though I used all my self-restraint to prevent me from doing so.

He swiped through the ticket barrier and began the descent to the platforms. I followed after him, hopping over the barriers (not being a believer in the Oyster card system), and then pursing him head down, as if I ran the risk of him recognizing me. I realize now how preposterous that notion was, but please understand, I was so energized, like someone had plugged me into the National Grid, my mind racing, I wasn't thinking rationally. As we alighted the escalator, I wondered, will he go south? Through Bank, Kennington, or north towards Highgate and Kentish town, he certainly looked as if he belonged in those post-codes, and I, ripped jeans, patchy beard and soiled duffel coat, certainly looked as if I did not.

I groaned as the train came to a stop at Hendon, and Darcy, sat on the next row of seats, rose to his feet to get off. I have a great dislike for Hendon, I think it's the houses, all faux

unique, the roads so straight and quiet, like the Stepford Wives gone dull and predictable. However, this was his journey not mine, so I obediently followed him, murmuring and muttering to myself to keep up the pretense of a loon, not a stalker. We walked past The Hendon, a nondescript pub on the main road, I was close to him now, though it was dark, I could see him quiet clearly under the street-lights. The road was quiet, I had no concept of what time it could be, only that the questions within me were forcing their way out.

“Hey.” He froze. There was no one else around. I have a deep voice, and people tend to stop when I speak. He turned slowly, as if on a rotating plinth in a car showroom, when he saw me his eyes seemed to widen and he drew the bag closer to his chest.

“What?” he replied, in the aggressive voice used by those who cannot back it up. I paused, I had not thought of how to do this. I had fantasized about this moment for so long that I had overlooked the moments that would inevitably follow.

“What’s your name?” I said, stepping forward, simultaneously as he stepped back. The bag was at his throat now, like a shield.

“What?” he said again, in a hurried, small-guy voice, before adding, “Matthew.” Matthew McFadden played Darcy in the 2012 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. I nodded to myself, accepting this name change.

“I need to ask you some questions.” He turned and began to walk quickly away. I should have expected this reaction, my manner and size tend to create an image of hostility, though that is rarely my intention. My problems tend to arise when I do not know how to react to those who perceive me as being hostile, even when I am being quite the opposite.

“Hey.” I called, striding after him.

“Fuck off.” He stammered, almost breaking into a run, but I am so much taller, I kept pace easily.

“It’s about Elizabeth.”

“Who?” his snarled response knocked me sideways. Who? Fucking who?”

Was he not at the same break-up that I witnessed? How could the image of her not be seared into his memory for the rest of his days? I stopped, stunned, and he did the same, keeping his distance whilst I swayed slightly on the spot.

"Your girlfriend." I said eventually. I wanted him to understand that this was important, so I place a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, his face went very white under the street-light.

"Fuck off pig." he tried to move, which only strengthened my grip.

"I want to ask you some questions." I said again, calmly, though I could feel my anger rising at his irrationality towards the situation, and at his bad language.

"You police? Sean's lot?" he was yammering now, the words spilled out of his mouth,

"Who is Sean?" There was nobody called Sean in any of Bronte's works I thought, before shaking the thought out of my mind and putting my other hand on his other shoulder. "Why did you break up with her? Who called you? What did you do?"

"You are a fucking copper!" he tried to free his arms but it was like holding a child, he twisted and turned, screaming in my face.

"I am not a copper." I shouted back, losing control of my limbs, some autonomous force took over and I retreated to a viewing position just behind my eyes, "Tell me what happened," I screamed, animal-like as I shook him like a rag doll, "Tell me." I pulled his neck towards me and forced it back, the skull cracked against the concrete of the lamppost and the body went limp in my arms. He fell away and I relieved him of his bag, I was a detective, there must be a clue. There was a smaller McDonald's bag inside; I peered in with eager hands. Two dozen plastic bags, piled atop one another, each swollen with white powder.

I exhaled. Drugs. I chuckled to myself. It seemed obvious, though I guessed my exploits to come thus far suggested that it had not been so obvious. Matthew had crawled from the lamppost back towards the pub, a smudge of dark blood was clearly visible where I had forced the truth from me. I bit my lip, that might have ramifications later down the line I thought. I raised the hood on my jacket, and began to walk in the opposite direction, picking up the crumpled McDonalds bag as I went.

As the sun came up the next morning I was standing on Vauxhall Bridge looking back along the river. It was a beautiful sight, not one that enough people in London see. I had taken a fair amount of Matthew's cocaine and I ground my back teeth in slow rhythmic fashion. The rest of the drugs I had sold to a guy I knew operating behind a kebab shop in Bethnal Green. There was no other woman. Darcy/Matthew had been faithful to his Elizabeth. Faithful of sorts, in any event, one does not always require another person to be adulterous. As I stared out at the golden ripples moving across the water's surface, I played out further scenes from the lives of Elizabeth and Darcy. How they met; how they fell in love; how he slipped into the shadowy life that eventually cost him his relationship, and a fair amount of brain cells in the end. It was a bittersweet life, I concluded, as I saw her meeting eyes with the new guy at her office, just as I had seen him collecting together enough money to pay off his newly acquired drug debt. I was tired, they had stretched me out as far as I could go, but I knew I had to go again, to once more descend down the escalators to London's subterranean world, to close more circles, to write new stories. I had no other choice. ■

*Peter is a British writer based in London after three years working in Switzerland and before that in Tanzania. He has written a collection of short stories entitled **A Fractured Mirror** and is currently seeking a publisher for his first novel, **Meadowlands**, a dystopian drama set in an alternate London in which corporations have taken over the government and all people are now split in three new social classes: Employee, Management and Executive with social mobility a thing of the past. **Meadowlands** will be published in 2018. When he is not writing, Peter works for the British civil service.*

If you would like to submit a story for consideration to BOOKS 'N PIECES MAGAZINE, you may do so from our Website at www.BooksNPieces.com, and select the SUBMIT tab.



INTERVIEW

K.J. HOWE

Born in Toronto, Canada, KJ Howe enjoyed a nomadic lifestyle during her early years, living in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and the Caribbean, which gave her an insider's view into many different cultures.

She attended Salzburg International Preparatory School, Neuchâtel Junior College, and Albert College before earning a Specialists Degree in Business from the University of Toronto. KJ found success in the corporate world, but her passion for travel, adventure, and stories drew her back to school where she earned a Masters in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. She also won several writing awards, including three Daphne du Maurier Awards for Excellence in Mystery and Suspense.

- *What value did you gain from your experience as a medical, health and fitness writer, insofar as your writing career, and how difficult was it to break into those fields?*

As a medical writer, I had tight deadlines and firm word counts. This taught me discipline and brevity, as I had to make every word count. When I switched over to fiction, I tried to incorporate these lessons into my novels, but the skills involved are quite different. In

medical writing, you tend to “tell” the facts in direct, precise language, whereas in fiction, you need to paint a whole world for the reader to be immersed in, “showing” the dramatic action that makes a novel compelling. I was fortunate to meet a wonderful mentor, Susan Jenkins, who taught me the ins and outs of medical writing so my entree into the field was smoothed by that relationship. I enjoyed the experience, and my medical writing background bleeds into my fiction in many ways. For example, my elite kidnap negotiator has type 1 diabetes, a subject that I wrote about as a medical writer. I’m keen to bring authenticity to the page on the medical front and to show people that having diabetes doesn’t have to stop you from reaching for your goals.

- You went to college focused on business, and yet became a writer. What was the turning point for you where you knew that writing was your career path? What reservations did you have and how did you overcome those obstacles?

I always wanted to write fiction, but I realized that learning the craft would take time and energy, and one has to eat, right? So I studied business, worked in that environment for many years, while pursuing my passion. We all have that little voice that wonders if we can really make our dreams a reality, but I burned to be a published novelist, so I kept at it. You need the hide of a rhino in the publishing business to withstand all the rejection and criticism. My best advice is to avoid taking it personally. Writing is quite subjective. I kept my head down and studied, hoping that one day I could improve enough to entice publisher interest. I’m very grateful that I now have two books out that have received starred reviews from Kirkus, Publishers Weekly, Library Journal, and BookList. I’ll keep trying to learn more about storytelling with future books, evolving as an author.

- Your writing is backed by heavy research, including interviewing people related to things in your books, such as hostage negotiators, former hostages and so on. With the Internet

offering a wealth of available information, what added value did you gain from directly obtaining your own research?

Excellent question. I spent extensive time on the internet researching kidnapping before I reached out to any experts. I wanted to show these brave souls that I'd done my homework. The internet can't quite capture the insider's knowledge offered by people who work in this field every day. There are only twenty-five to thirty individuals in the world who are full-time crisis response consultants, and I've had the distinct pleasure of getting to know several of them. My life has truly changed from these relationships. It has been an incredible journey, and I hope to bring awareness about all the hostages out there who still have yet to come home. Also, when I read novels, I enjoy learning things while being entertained, so that's what I have tried to do in my books. All the information in the books is authentic. The story and characters are fictional of course, but you'll learn a great deal about the world of kidnap and ransom and be a safer traveler from investing time reading *THE FREEDOM BROKER* and *SKYJACK*. And before you plan your next vacation, please check out the map of kidnap hot zones on my website at www.kjhowe.com

- You are the Executive Director of Thrillerfest (July 10-14, 2018), the conference of the International Thriller Writers which boasts many big name members and sponsors. How did this come about, and how does this impact the exposure of your work?

I volunteered at the first ThrillerFest in Phoenix, Arizona. From there, I became more involved in the International Thriller Writers, and I've been the executive director of ThrillerFest for the last nine years. It's a dream job to work with some of the top authors in the thriller genre. These talented writers have been wonderfully supportive of me and my books. At ThrillerFest, our goal is to support authors, so please come join us. It's like summer camp for writers, and we offer a fun, friendly, and professional atmosphere. To learn more, please visit www.thrillerfest.com

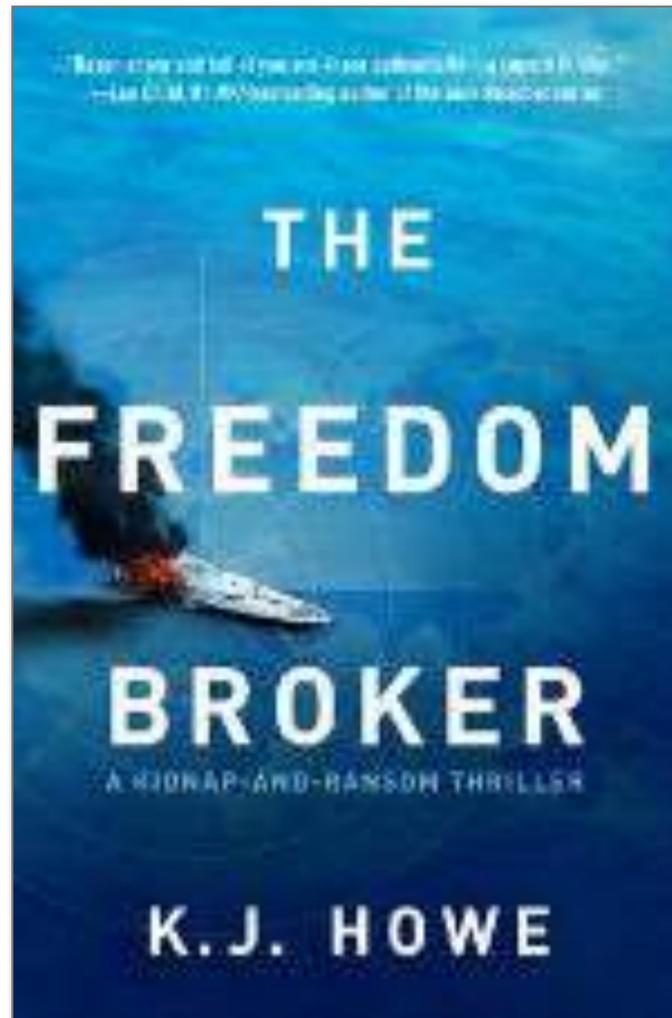
- Do you recall the very first thing you wrote, and your reaction to that piece then, and now, and how it has changed?

My first writing class was at a romance writer's event at a local library. I remember the joy in being able to create characters and a whole new world. I look back and realize that my creativity was there, but my writing skills needed plenty of work. It has been a fun journey, and I'm so grateful I kept this dream alive!

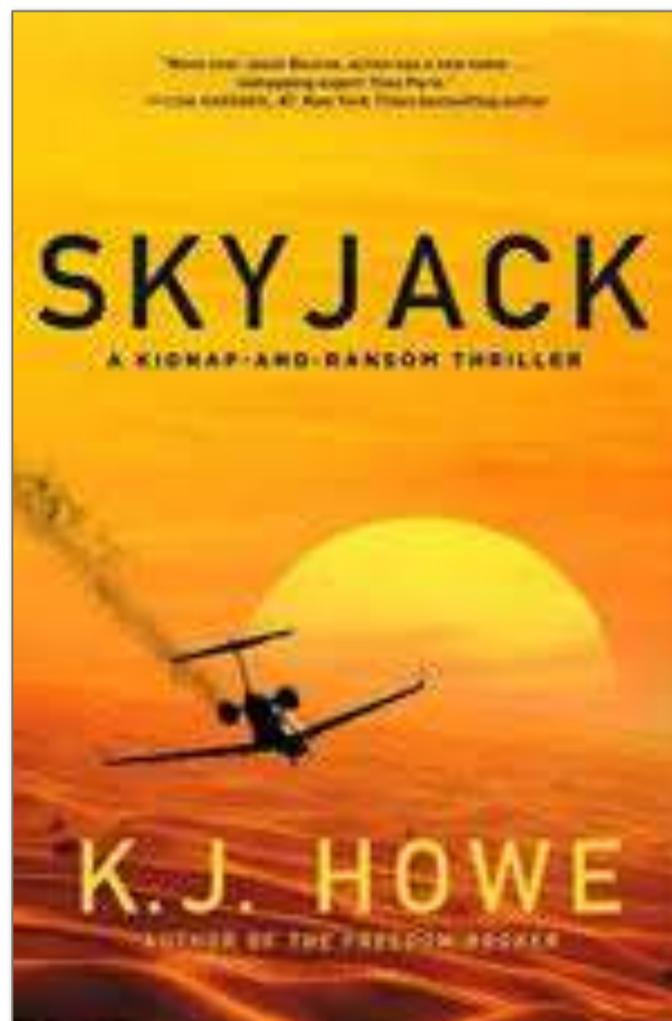
- These days everyone is a writer. These days very few writers are able to sustain themselves on a writing income. There are lots of terrible writers out there. Likewise, there are many gems to be discovered. What advice do you have to writers who are not yet published, especially in determining whether writing is a passion, a career, or just a wish?

Writing is hard work. As I mentioned earlier, you need to look at this as a long-term project. Find a subject that ignites your passion, as kidnapping has sparked mine. Then study, embrace criticism, and keep believing. The people who persevere in this field are the ones who refused to quit. Be stubborn and be open to criticism from credible sources, and you'll realize your dream.

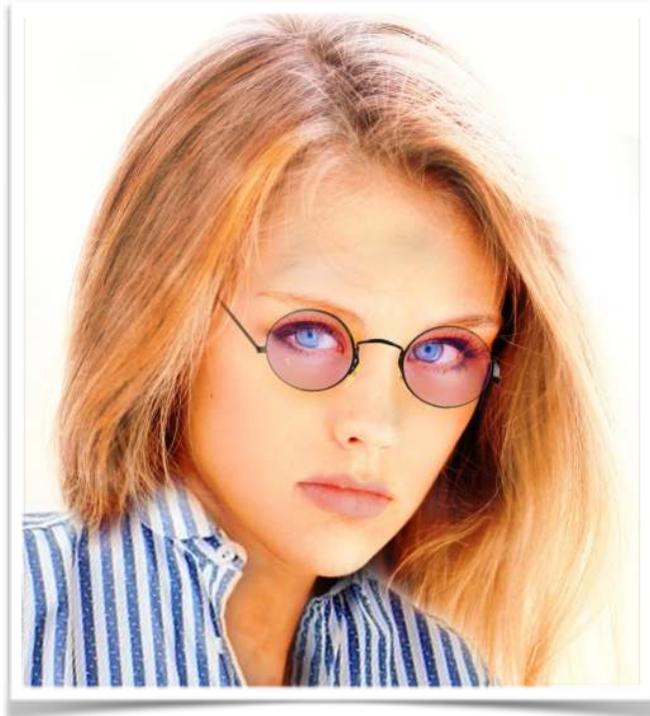
My next Thea Paris novel, *SKYJACK*, is being released on April 10, and I'm grateful the feedback so far has been very positive. I love hearing from readers, so please visit me on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at @KJHoweAuthor ■



Buy [The Freedom Broker](#)



and [Skyjack](#) by KJ Howe



INTERVIEW

ASHLEY ADAMS

Born in Sydney, Australia, Ashley Adams spent her early years at a Melbourne boarding school, learning to use her writing skills first with the school newspaper, and later as its chief editor. From age twenty-two she began submitting short stories to various regional magazines, mostly science-fiction. Finding a tepid initial response, she resubmitted them under a male pseudonym and was published by two separate publications.

*Her series, **THE ZERO-G CLUB**, has received positive reviews as hot, sci-fi romance.*

- Your novella, *THE ZERO-G CLUB* has received many positive reviews as a good story, and yet you've encountered resistance from Amazon and other outlets in your promotions because of the graphic sexual scenes. Had you considered this prior to publishing the book, and what were your thoughts regarding that?

That is a difficult question to answer. Yes, there are two, somewhat brief, hot sex scenes in the book, both essential to the development of the central character. Should I have removed

those, or tamed them down? Perhaps. And yet, if you read most romances today, they include some heavy scenes of their own. Personally, I did not feel they detracted from anything; in fact, the physical relationships we have in life are often quite pronounced and memorable. As a writer, I do not feel the need to avoid this part of life. Amazon has restrictions on promotions because of the sexual content. That's a shame. As a result I have to use other outlets to promote the book.

- The main theme of the book is akin to the Mile-High Club of modern day aircraft frolics. How did you decide upon that as a focal point, and why?

Emilee Stanton, the lead character in the story, begins her journey with a single goal; to get recognized in the Zero-G Club. As you point out, this is a mile-high equivalent. So we are introduced to the character as a young, sexually attractive woman, out to achieve this goal from a strictly sexual point of view. With the current #MeToo movement, with regards to Hollywood sexual predators, it seemed a current topic, more so in that women are often in positions of making choices that they may wish were different. Understand that I am not defending Hollywood predators, and certainly I can sympathize with the many women victimized in their efforts to attain serious acting roles. That said, I wanted my character to start off more simplistically, having this simple, sexual goal. She is exploiting her sexuality for a ridiculous goal because she can, not unlike many young women do, and certainly as media advertising tends to push the concept of woman as sexual objects. As the story progresses, however, Emilee grows into a new role that really defines her through the remainder of this book, and subsequent books, a growth that transcends superficiality for more substantial things. Sex is fine; but brains are better!

- In an earlier discussion you reported that you wrote this backwards, offering the sexual payoff early in the story. Why?

Wanting to have my character develop into a mature and effective woman, I needed to get past the obvious exploitive sexuality early on. In most romance books, the tease drags the

story forward to the ultimate, passionate payoff. I always thought it was kind of unfair. By dealing with it early, Emilee can focus on the meat of the story, grow as a character, and set herself up for the subsequent stories to come. It's funny because one of the Beta readers told me that she was disappointed that there wasn't more sex; however the story was good and well told. What a terrific compliment.

- [Are you Emilee Stanton?](#)

You mean am I the sexual nymphette of the story? Heck no. In real life I would be called something of a prude. I consider myself modest, respectable, generally quiet. But that is the joy of writing, letting loose in ways that you would never do in real life. So do I share traits with Emilee? Yes, a few. I take a challenge. I am persistent, although not in the way she is.

- [What's the best and worst part of writing for you?](#)

I hate typing. I have to write the story on the computer because I hate rewrites, even though they are a necessary evil. At least having it typed makes it easier to rearrange, block out bits, add new bits. I had thought I would enjoy writing longhand, however the one time I tried it, faced with typing from notes, I hated it. The best part is putting it aside for a few days and then coming back and reading it again. While it is not fresh, it does hold a newness to it.

- [Do you have other writing completed?](#)

I started out ghostwriting for clients several years ago. Several of these books have been published under the client names. Obviously I cannot tell you who; however these books gave me the opportunity to work on my craft, find things that worked and did not work. I still do ghostwrite and probably will until I can make a stable income from my own work. It is ironic that the ghostwriting often pays better than what a writer can make themselves.

- [Any advice for other new writers?](#)

Don't give up. If you work at something long enough you will succeed, in whatever form that may be.

You can read Ashley on social media at www.HotAshley.com

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/HotAshleyAdams/>

Twitter: www.twitter.com/HotAshleyAuthor @HotAshleyAuthor

Her book *THE ZERO-G CLUB: Lust & Honor* is available on [Amazon](#)



BOOK PREVIEW BY ASHLEY ADAMS

THE ZERO-G CLUB

Chapter Two:

"You did what?" Nissa blurted, spitting her coffee in the process.

"Sshh," I said. "If I wanted to announce it I'd post it on the comm board."

Nissa wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, a huge grin on her face. "You did Gregg in a broom closet?" She wiped her hands against her thick, curly reddish hair. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

Nissa was also a fem-tech and my bunk mate, the closest thing to a friend I had on board. We became friends on our first day of training, mostly because she laughed at my crass comments while everyone else kept a straight face. She was a big girl, Maori ancestry somewhere coating her skin with a rich dark sheen, and her lips fuller and more expressive than most.

"You think he's gonna want more?" she asked, once she had cleaned the droplets from herself. I shook my head.

"He's not my type, anyway," I said. "Besides, getting involved with a flyboy will only screw up my chances of making club grade, if you know what I mean."

She nodded. "Still resolute on that, eh?"

"And you are still my witness, right?"

She nodded. "You're one crazy, you know," she said, then sighed. "I'd be happy just getting laid once!"

"You will," I assured her. "Just don't be so...."

"Afraid?"

"Don't be so boring about it. Guys like a flirt. They like to get all puffed up and have a bit of a chase."

"I s'pose." She scrunched up her face, looked around. "Not much to choose from, tho."

"Don't be so picky," I told her. "You're wanting a sex, not Prince Charming. Besides, what happens in the hanger bay, stays in the hanger bay, right?"

"We'll see. I need to be more like you and just go rushing in," Nissa said. Then, changing the subject, asked: "So have you figured out how you're gonna...you know...on the bridge?"

It was a good question. And in truth, I had no answers. I needed to gain access and that alone would limit my choices. "I need some help from someone there," I told her.

"Otherwise there is no way to get on the bridge."

"Bridge crew are not going to risk their jobs for you," Nissa said. "Can you imagine if they got caught, aside from your bigger problem of where on the bridge you plan to do it."

I nodded. "I know. But there has to be a way. I just have to find it. I'm not giving up."

"Well listening to the chatter in the mess this morning, you may have a chance if we get into a fight."

"What fight?" I asked.

She smiled. "Right, you weren't in the mess this morning!"

"Tell me," I insisted.

Nissa leaned in closer. "There's talk we may run into weapons smugglers."

"Pirates?" I gasped. "That's friggin' great. If we have a fight, there will be a lot of commotion and I...."

"Exactly," Nissa said, "assuming we don't get blown up or anything."

I was beaming. Even a small battle would send crew members in all directions. If I could find my way to the bridge I might be able to figure out the rest of my plan.

Ever since the military gained a solid space presence, other groups posed a threat. China, still a quasi-foe, had its own fleet of ships, including many smaller *junk* ships: lightly-crewed small craft, ornately designed to look like one of the old sailing junks from a century back. There were Russian, Indian, and Israeli cruisers. Renegade vessels, usually scavengers were picking apart the hulls of ships that had been abandoned in the various battles, often made weapon runs to outfit their own ships, slowly forming a resistance to the military.

It was the standing orders of the military that we blast any weapons smugglers—pirates—into scrap and take no prisoners. This was meant as a deterrent to others also considering piracy. However, instead of being a deterrent, it just pissed them off, angry at the callous regard for human life that our military was showing. Forming their own fleet, the United Independent Armada (UIA), they now acted more as terrorists, deliberately attacking and causing as much damage as they could. Even the Chinese fleet was not immune to attacks, although less so.

"When?" I asked Nissa.

"When what?"

"When will they attack?"

"How do I know," she whined. "It's just scuttlebutt in the mess. Might be bogus for all I know."

"Well, we are not on any kind of alert," I said, "so I guess that means no immediate threat, right?"

As if on cue, the PA crackled on, and the booming voice of Master-Chief echoed through the hall. "Attention people. We're on notice from upstairs. I want all fighters readied for launch, pulse cannons checked, and observation ports manned. If we're lucky we might meet a pirate or two, says the captain. Condition Yellow. Condition Yellow. Now get off your sorry butts and let's get ready."

"Wipe that smile off your face," Nissa said, staring hard at me. "Let's go, girl."

We headed out to the gangway and down to the bay where we would be working, my mind ablaze with all the possibilities. To get inside the bridge I would need security clearance. And to get that I would need to know a security officer, but not just any security officer; he had to be on the night crew, someone who could get me a look, who might know places unknown to the others.

"And how will you achieve that?" Nissa asked as we both sat at our consoles, punching up the codes for the zip fighters' status. I remained silent, scanning the fighter lists, noting one that wasn't showing battle readiness. We couldn't afford any fighters to be unavailable for combat.

"What time is shift change?" I asked.

"What?"

"You know, when the crews rotate for night duty. I assume it's the same as ours?"

"It's not," Nissa answered. "Bridge switches after the rest of the stations. I read it in a manual during training. I guess the captain needs to know all is well before he can retire."

"We end at 20 bells," I said. "So...21 bells?"

"Except you are in your quarters and not supposed to be roaming the ship, remember?"

I punched up the intercom and dialed Master-Chief's code. "Master-Chief, number eleven is showing at 70 percent with a fluctuation on the starboard thruster. It needs to be pulled."

"Do it," he boomed. "You handling the repair, Candy?"

"Yeah. I'll load into bay three."

"Think you can have it ready in the hour?"

"Is that how long until...?"

"Not for you to know, sweetheart. Can you or can't you? I need a count."

"Maybe...yes, sir. She'll be ready if you stop calling me Candy."

"Good girl. Lemme know when. Chief out."

I looked at Nissa. "Wanna help?"

I input the command for the lifters to move zip-eleven to the empty service bay, and we headed down. As we entered, the craft was just touching the bay floor. The lifter disengaged and remained above. We'd need it at the ready to put the fighter back into service as soon as we were done.

Nissa pulled the tool cart over as I began to unbolt the thruster housing. She plugged in the comm-link to the fighter's computer, and hunted for the fluctuation, starting a route-trace to the faulty component causing the glitch.

"Board 15 A dash X dash 2. The chip's fried," she said.

"Easy-peasey," I said. I loved it when all you did was pull an entire board instead of messing with individual components like we usually did. Since the craft was needed, proper procedure stated to take the shortest path to repair.

I reached in, scanned for the board code until the scanner beeped green, then used the grippers to rip it straight up and out like a bad tooth. The comm-link flat-lined, now missing some of the guts of the craft to register.

Nissa had already fetched a replacement from the dispenser unit. The dispenser was a large rectangular machine filling an entire bay wall. The interface looked like one of those antique snack food dispensers with letters and numbers, except that you punched in the part code and it would be dispensed through the side door.

The board Nissa collected, was wrapped in a non-static pad and I would have to take care not to touch it directly or I'd fry it in a second. Using the grippers, I clamped onto the top side, peeled off the wrap and then, without touching anything else, wiggled it into the correct slot on the thruster controller box. Latching it securely with the gripper, I nodded to

Nissa who fired up the comm-link interface, waiting for the diagnostic to complete. Seeing a green, 100-percent, she gave me a thumbs up, and I rebolted down the housing.

Fifteen minutes. Not bad. Master-Chief wasn't expecting it for another forty-five minutes. But then, I had an idea that would likely only take a few minutes tops.

"Nissa, can you do me a favor?"

She looked at me, knowing that I was up to something.

"We've got time before Master-Chief needs this. Can you run diagnostics if I leave you alone for ten minutes?"

"Oh shit, you're not...", she said.

"It's a perfect opportunity," I explained. "Look, I know it's still day crew, but if I can find out who the security officer is for night crew, I can get back later, faster and not get caught...please?"

Nissa frowned, shook her head in disbelief. "Ten minutes. No more. After that, I'm going to get the fighter back to the hanger and you'll have to deal with the chief."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," I said, kissing her on the forehead then running toward the aerolift door. I pressed the button, and patiently waited the few second for a tube to arrive. The door slipped open and I stepped in. "Bridge," I instructed. The door slipped shut and I was instantly pulled up the twenty-six levels to the bridge deck. I was holding my breath. ■

Want to read more? You can get a Chapter One sample and buy the book at [Amazon](#).



INTERVIEW/REFLECTION - PART TWO

KURT KOONTZ

In the last issue of Books 'N Pieces Magazine, Kurt Koontz, a Boise-based author of *A MILLION STEPS* shared his travel experiences, and how his trip along the famed Camino de Santiago, a network of pilgrimage to the shrine of the apostle Saint James the Great in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in northwestern Spain, affected his life and the direction he knew it would take him. Many people worldwide follow the routes as a form of spiritual path or retreat for their spiritual growth. It is also popular with hiking and cycling enthusiasts and organized tour groups.

In this issue, we have elected to forego the Q&A format, and to focus on Kurt's words alone.

Trips, Visions & Family

It's my dream and personal vision, to speak to interested groups, sharing what I have learned in India, and other places, sharing what I learn everyday.

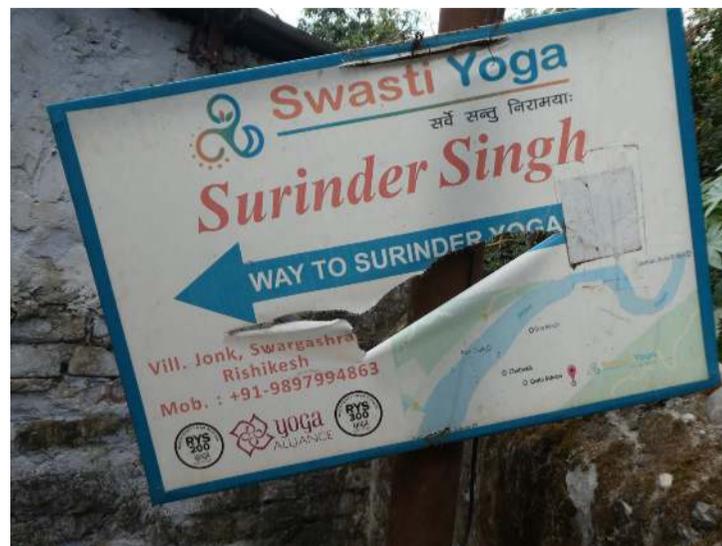
Up to now I've had to subsidize these trips myself, and I think that I have enough unique information and experiences to share that I shouldn't need to do that. To put my costs into perspective for my last trip to India, my airfare was \$1100, my yoga training was \$1000. My room and board, and all my meals were \$400 for the forty-five days I was there. It would be nice to offset that by holding seminars for people interested in learning more. I have so many stories to tell. Just in the photographs I have, there is a book. I recall everything through the photographs, more so than in taking notes.

For me it's a never-ending travel experience. I ended up in Costa Rica in May (2017). I like to find yoga centric communities, not just because of my interest in yoga, but I find that the people who like yoga tend to be really kind people, and so whenever I go anywhere I try to find where the Yoga hot spots are, and Costa Rica has several really good Yoga hot spots. They also happen to have beautiful beaches. Both local and international people; the international people are the wood for the fire, and the local people are the instructors.

Unfortunately on the fifth day there I had a surfing accident and badly hurt my shoulder. The yoga I do tends to be more active; so because of my injury I had to mellow out, which put me in a different classroom with a different set of teachers, and quite a lot of older people. It turned out to be a huge blessing because, as a result, I got to learn a lot from them.

When I came home I ended up needing surgery and an extended recovery period. My doctor eventually said I could do yoga but to take it easy. I took that as a green light to go to India and take a 200-hour teacher-training course from my all-time favorite yogi whose

name is Surinda Singh (considered by many to be one of the best yoga teachers in the world.) So that is what I did. You can watch me with Surinda on [YouTube](#).



It was my third trip to India, and I signed up for a 200-hour yoga/meditation teacher training course with 16 other students at the Swasti Yoga Shala. Twelve of us lived in the guest house in the same building as the classes, and the guest house is composed of individual rooms and bathrooms. My modest room had barely enough space for a double bed and a small desk. My closet had two hangers and was three feet wide and four feet tall. The building, almost impossible to find, has five floors. The first has a reception area, a kitchen, guest bathroom, and a dining hall. Floors 2-4 each have four guest rooms. The top floor is the yoga studio with duct tape binding large sheets of thin brown carpet that almost cover a concrete floor.



Of the sixteen people, four men and twelve women, came from Argentina, Ecuador, Iran, Ukraine, Poland, Germany, Italy, Australia, the UK - not one country duplicated. I was by far the oldest guy at 53 years old. The closest to me in age was 42. Most others were between 25 - 35 years. So you can see the variety of people taking these classes.



We all became a family. We ate vegetarian food together, a complete change of diet and routine. We also had our yoga training, philosophy class, and anatomy class everyday, along with meditation and chanting. The stuff I learned was mind blowing. What I really learned was how much of yoga needs to be taken off the mat and incorporated into the rest of your life. Most people tend to look at yoga as how do I get a cute butt, how do I get physically fit, and the Indian teachers say a strong body is the gateway to self-respect.



Most of the friends I make in India tend to be men; women tend to be more suspect of men. But it's a wide variety of very good friends. My best friend over there is seventy years old, a shopkeeper, and he has run the same little store for 45 years. For the first 25 years his family lived in the store in the back. Now as time has gone on I have come to know all three of his boys, his wife, his two grandkids and we are dear friends.

Yoga teaches you are made of 5 elements that each relate to your Chakras. There is an Indian ceremony called Aarti that celebrates light. There is chanting, costumes and at the end there is light, a lot of candles.



A group of boys stream through the ashram every afternoon. They end up at a nightly ceremony with music and flames. It's an Indian happy hour by Mother Ganga.



The Ganges River, for the past two years, during Aarti, I see across the way (about two football fields across) these large fires, and they are outdoor cremations. And I find it amazing that we are on one side of the river having so much joy celebrating life, and right across the way is the end of someone else's life.

So on this trip, one day I went and watched a cremation, but I sat down and stayed respectfully far enough away. I didn't see the beginning, however. Some guy comes up to me and asks what I am doing there. And I just said I am fascinated by the whole situation, so different from my country's practices, and I wanted to learn more about their ritual.

I look at the ground and I see rock and sand, water in the river, the fire from the cremation and the fumes representing the air. Above all that the Himalayas and the universe. So in Yoga I am learning one thing about the elements, and here I see it in life.

It was the man's grandfather who was being cremated. The man was a cop from New Delhi, and after some time passed he looked at me and asked if I minded if we took some selfies. So there we are taking funeral selfies.

I asked him why no women were present for the cremation, and he said they are not permitted. Men are full of logic and reason and no innate love. Women are the divine energy; that's all they are—love. And if women were to lose love they would never have children, because having a child requires unconditional love. So when a family member dies they all walk to river, but a hundred meters or so from the river the women turn back. The men know the body has to be burned in order for the soul to be released. But if the women were to watch it would harden them and they would lose love and stop having children.

Now this was the end part of the cremation that I had come to and I didn't see the beginning until the end of my trip. All of a sudden out of nowhere appear these men carrying huge pieces of wood on their shoulders, bringing the material. They stack it up. Then the family comes carrying the covered body on a gurney type device, beautiful white garlands across it. They take the body to the river and then stack the wood. Then they uncover the body, do a beautiful ceremony, and bring it to the pyre, adding more wood

around it. Then they start another little fire and each brings burning wood to the pyre to start it.

At the end of the ceremony they go to the river, take some water to wash their face, then take some back to the body, to symbolically return it to the river. After the ceremony, the men pick a stick from the ground, snap it and throw it over their shoulder, only as they are walking away, not looking back. It breaks the connection.

The fire burns at least ten hours, the next day the family goes back and sifts through for any bones, and then they wash the bones, and then take them to a sacred temple. The rest of the ash goes back into the river. Every Indian's dream is to go back to the river. It was amazing to watch.

On my last day in India I told a lot of people I was leaving. So I met my young friend for breakfast where he works, and I made a card and I had put some money in it for him, and gave it to him, but told him not to open it until I was out of the country - I was leaving at 3 o'clock. He immediately got a smile on his face and says, how interesting, I made a card for you and here it is. At the end of the meal I went to pay and he said 'no money from you today.' This is a nineteen year old kid living in a poor place. The people are like this.



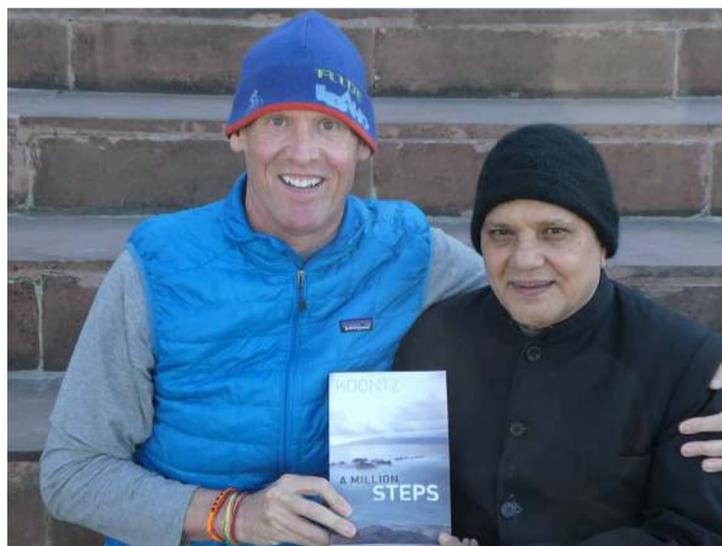
So I finish there and walk down the street and run into another friend who calls me Mister Kurt. So I am surrounded by all these people and I hear 'Mister Kurt, Mister Kurt. You leave today right?' and I say, 'yes I do.' He reaches under the counter and has a plastic bag with

individually wrapped items in newspaper. He says, 'My mom made you food for your journey home.' It's priceless.

Further down the same street is a man from whom I bought art the year before. I have his painting in my bedroom, and I have sent him pictures of it. He says, 'you didn't buy any art this year,' and I tell him I haven't seen him. He hand selects a piece of art and gives it to me as a gift. Who does this?



My final part of the day is with my friend, the shopkeeper, and he wants to take a picture with me and my book. He insists on a photo before he will read it. But he changes to his best outfit, having showered, shaved, and we walk to the river to take the photos. This is just four hours in my final day.



These people are broke. Yet these are the ones who always give. Incredibly generous. It is such a special place.



After this trip I have enough material to write another book. It won't be a travelogue, but more of a life lesson. Here's how you can live your life, how you can open yourself up. How other people are living their life. It's such a gift to be able to experience it, and I want to share that. ■

Kurt Koontz grew up with a lot of the outdoors in Boise, Idaho. He studied business at the University of Puget Sound, then returned to his hometown to rise through the ranks as a sales executive for Micron Technology. While working, he traveled on business across the U.S. and the world. When he retired at age 36, he took to adventure travel—mostly by bicycle across Europe and in the Western U.S. and Canada. It wasn't until 2012 that he began writing about his adventures. That year, he walked the 500-mile El Camino de Santiago, the Spanish pilgrimage route dating from medieval times. This journey, he says, was a very different kind of travel. His book [A MILLION STEPS](#) is available in print and [ebook](#).

You can find him Online:

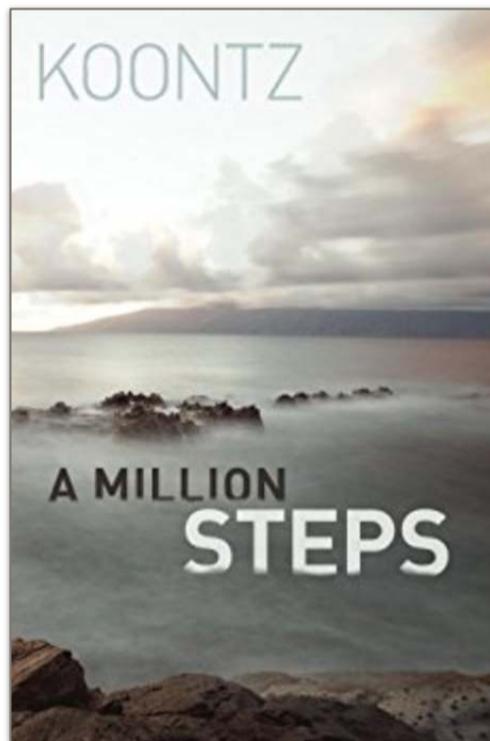
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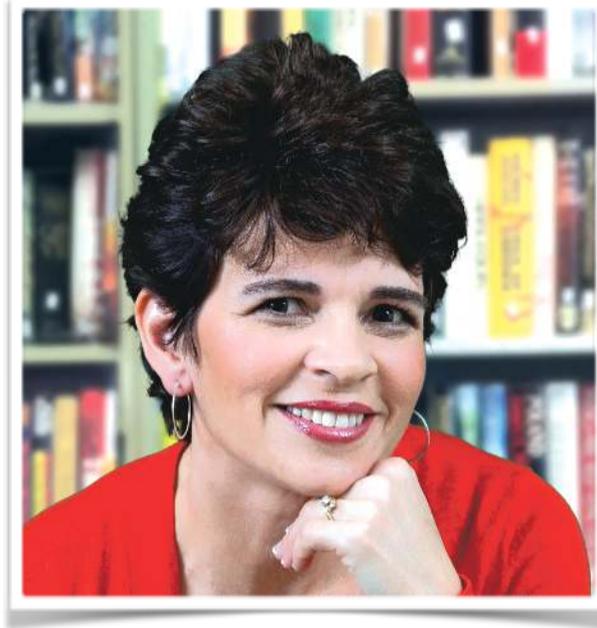
[Photo credit: All photos courtesy of Kurt Koontz]

Also by KURT KOONTZ

A MILLION STEPS



Kurt Koontz thought he was well prepared for his 490-mile walking trip on the historic Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in Spain. He was fit and strong. He had a good guidebook and all the right equipment. His pilgrim passport would grant him access to the shelter of hostels along the way. But all that, however helpful, did not begin to encompass the grandeur of his external or internal adventure. Buy **A MILLION STEPS on AMAZON.**



BOOK REVIEW BY JILL HEDGECK

SPOONBENDERS

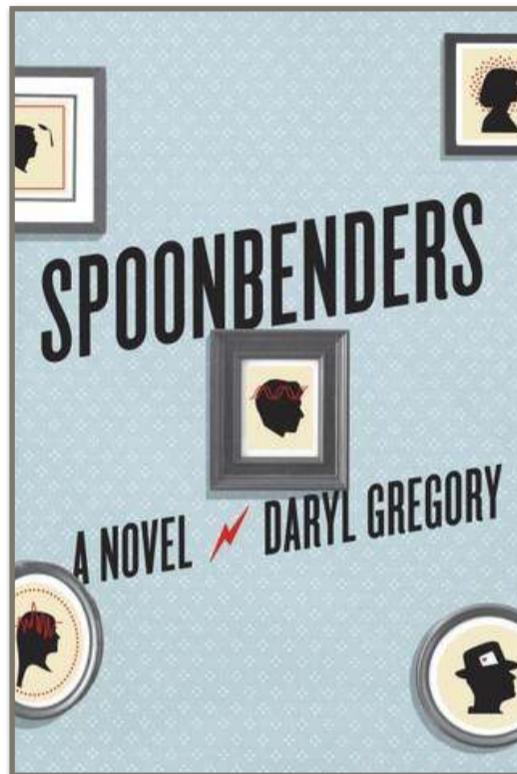
SPOONBENDERS by Daryl Gregory (2017)

Imagine having a daughter who can tell if you're lying. Imagine your son, Buddy, can see the future, but not all the details. Imagine your other son, Frankie, can move things with his mind, but because he is a chronic failure as an entrepreneur, he has gotten involved with the mob to solve his business investment debts. These are just a few of the issues that the patriarch of the family, Teddy Telemachus, must grapple with in *SPOONBENDERS* by Daryl Gregory (2017, Knopf, hardcover, 416 pages \$19.00).

Teddy, a card shark and con man who married Maureen – the real deal when it comes to supernatural powers – fathered three children with special gifts. His children's unique talents are both a blessing and a curse. His daughter and eldest child, Irene, has also passed psychic traits on to her child (Teddy's grandchild), Matt. Matt is 14, though his family seems to have forgotten a year and constantly calls him a 13 year-old, is a typical preteen boy in many ways. But when he accidentally discovers that his consciousness can travel outside his body and confides in his Uncle Frankie, he's soon recruited into Frankie's plot to steal mob money from a safe in a nearby tavern.

Meanwhile, Buddy, a grown man of few words, can't see the whole future is trying to control the future to avoid a disastrous event called "The Zap." As a widower, Teddy

spends his free time trolling grocery stores for lady friends. Enter Graciella, a mob wife and object of Teddy's latest infatuation. But it soon becomes apparent there's more to this story—a lot more, and the reader soon discovers that Buddy's visions and mobsters are inexplicably intertwined.



Amid exploring all these varied characters and their unusual lives, the backstory of how Teddy met his wife and how the government recruited her to spy on the Russians round out the story. Enormously creative and crafted, *SPOONBENDERS*, is a one-of-a-kind read filled with humor, and despite all its quirkiness manages to explore the depths of family bonds and the extraordinary resilience of humanity amid chaos.

SPOONBENDERS was a Nebula Award Finalist, one of NPR's Best Books of the Year, and an Amazon Best Book. Paramount and Anonymous Content are developing it for television.

Daryl Gregory lives and writes full-time in Oakland. He is an award-winning writer of genre-mixing novels, stories, comics and even a video game. Some of his other works include a young adult novel *Harrison Squared* (Tor, March 2015), a Locus Award finalist, *Afterparty* which was an NPR and Kirkus Best Fiction book and *Pandemonium*, a finalist for the World Fantasy award. His novella, *We are All Completely Fine*, won the World Fantasy award and the Shirley Jackson award and is in development for television by Universal Cable Productions.

Jill Hedgecock is the Program Coordinator for The Mount Diablo branch of the California Writers Club. You can read more on her Website at www.jillhedgecock.com



NOW ON DVD/MOVIE REVIEW

STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI

There are NO SPOILERS in this review, just in case the last person in the galaxy hasn't seen it yet:

There are two distinct groups of Star Wars fans: those who enjoy the fun, galactic tale of Luke Skywalker's adventures to become a Jedi knight, and his battles against the evil empire; and those who devour every morsel of mythos as though it were a tangible and essential part of their lives. Thus, writing a review on this film (series) is a daunting task, certain to offend one group or another.

Having lived through four decades of Star Wars, beginning as a young man enamored with the magic of this epic space story, the philosophy of a Force deity that somehow binds all

parts of the living universe together, and now as an older, wiser, and certainly more jaded, human being, the series represents a large part of my adult life, in addition to being a fun set of films.

First, let's recap....

Following **The Force Awakens**, many fans were upset with the deviations from keeping the core of Star Wars intact. With the death of Han Solo (Harrison Ford), and a new group of Force sensitives, Rey (Daisy Ridley) and Finn (John Boyega), as well as a new droid, the gang found themselves, along with General Leia Organa (the late Carrie Fisher,) back in the same old circle of running and fighting the bad guys.

The resistance is still resisting, and the emperor, and his empire, though gone, are now embodied in the empirical First Order with the mysterious—and even more powerful than the emperor—evil Sith being, Snoke (Andy Serkis.)

TFA was a nice homecoming for those of us absent from the Star Wars prime storyline, the Skywalker storyline. But since, Han and Leia's son, Ben, while being trained by Luke, had been turned to the dark side of the Force, desperately emulating the evil image of his grandfather, Darth Vader. Renamed Kylo Ren (Adam Driver), he is oblivious to grandpa's return to the light side—moments before his death—and instead worships the old, broken, Vader mask.

After a clash with Rey, who surprisingly nearly bests him, leaving one of those nasty scars across his face, Ren has his training completed by Snoke. At the end of TFA, Rey finds Luke, holds out his old lightsaber for him to take, as we viewers swirl around them to the closing credits.

Okay, you are now caught up....

In **The Last Jedi** we find Luke, isolated, and not prepared to train yet another potential Jedi, fearing failure, and wanting to be left alone. He has learned one lesson; that Jedi and Sith are just two parts of a greater whole of the Force. It is time to end both, in his mind.

Meanwhile, Snoke, having trained Kylo Ren, has him facing off against Rey by manipulating events. Will she turn to the dark side? Who are her parents? Will Leia die (as Carrie Fisher did in real life) or will she find some way to get Luke back. After all, TFA and this movie complete the arc of that purpose. Does Finn die? And why are there no bathrooms on the Falcon?

This film is busy with the usual effects. The John Williams score pulls us back to the original film, through all the thematic variations we have seen in Episodes I through VII, adding new strains of emotive melodies. I am always amazed that the old musical wizard still has new themes left to share.

Most of the film time is spent with the embattled rebels attempting to achieve just one or two goals, with major turnabouts and character arcs, some of which will annoy viewers for a very long, long time. And in the end, the question of whether Luke will return to help restore peace in the galaxy, is answered in a new way, a way that will annoy those loyalists of the old Star Wars cannon, those legions of fans who cannot see past the last 40 years, to a new hope (no pun intended.)

No kidding—it's been 40 years for me since I was dazzled by Episode IV, way back in 1977. You have to understand that special effects were a rarity and Star Wars exploded with knock-your-socks-off effects.

It's been 40 years for the heroes we first cheered, the very first time. Time has not been so kind on some of the actors (in more ways than one,) despite the endurance of the franchise. But as is always the case in life, the old makes way for the new, not unlike old Obi-Wan giving way to Luke to become a Jedi.

The new heroes in the making are rough, still, and you can see that they are being set up for more post-Star Wars IX films. New stories, new discoveries. But for those of us who still recall the thrill the first time a lightsaber was activated, **The Last Jedi** is a reminder that the new audiences, even though they may have seen the original trilogy, were not there during those original days, that time of optimism, when film was fresh, idealistic, and not milked for every last cent that a sequel or a toy could bring.

Nonetheless, the film is very enjoyable, poignant in parts, ironic in others, nostalgic to a degree, and hopeful with young Rey, Finn, Poe and others, now finding their places in the worlds of this iconic series.

If you close your eyes, stretch out your feelings, and breathe...just breathe, you, too, can feel the Force surround you, flow through you, and bind you to that—still lovely—fanfare theme from a long, long time ago....

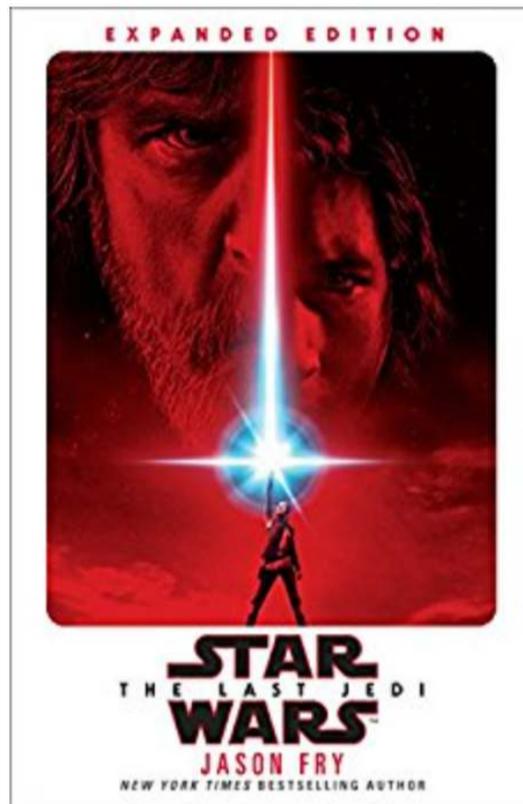
I rated it in two ways: 4-Stars if you just enjoy Star Wars or 2- Stars if you are a die-hard SW fan-analyst who will nit-pick this film to pieces, grunting all the while.

Written & Directed by Rian Johnson

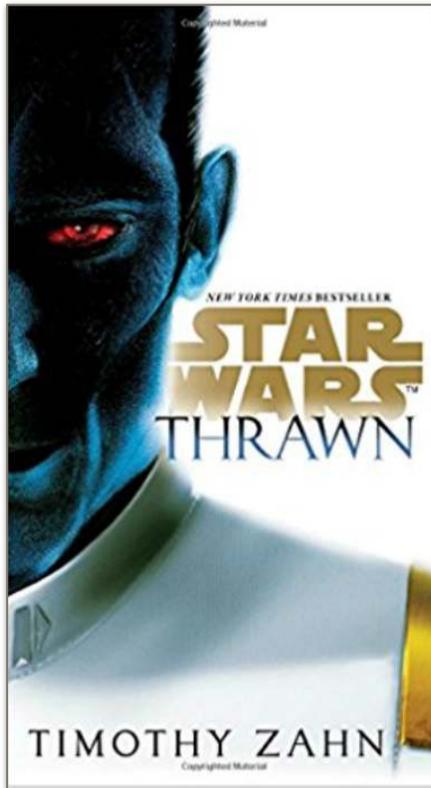
Cast: Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher, Adam Driver, Daisy Ridley, John Boyega, Oscar Isaac, Andy Serkis, Lupita Nyong'o, Domhnall Gleeson, Anthony Daniels, and Gwendoline Christie in returning roles, with Kelly Marie Tran, Laura Dern, and Benicio del Toro joining.

TALKING ABOUT MILKING A FRANCHISE—READ THE BOOKS

I've been told that many aspects of the film that appear to have gone unanswered, can be found in the novelization. Not having read the books, I can only suggest you find out for yourself. Here are some of the more recent iterations.



From the ashes of the Empire has arisen another threat to the galaxy's freedom: the ruthless First Order. Fortunately, new heroes have emerged to take up arms—and perhaps lay down their lives—for the cause. Rey, the orphan strong in the Force; Finn, the ex-stormtrooper who stands against his former masters; and Poe Dameron, the fearless X-wing pilot, have been drawn together to fight side-by-side with General Leia Organa and the Resistance. But the First Order's Supreme Leader Snoke and his merciless enforcer Kylo Ren are adversaries with superior numbers and devastating firepower at their command. Against this enemy, the champions of light may finally be facing their extinction. Their only hope rests with a lost legend: Jedi Master Luke Skywalker. **BUY IT NOW ON AMAZON IN PRINT, DIGITAL or AUDIOBOOK.**



One of the most cunning and ruthless warriors in the history of the Galactic Empire, Grand Admiral Thrawn is also one of the most captivating characters in the Star Wars universe, from his introduction in bestselling author Timothy Zahn's classic *Heir to the Empire* through his continuing adventures in *Dark Force Rising*, *The Last Command*, and beyond. But Thrawn's origins and the story of his rise in the Imperial ranks have remained mysterious. Now, in *Star Wars: Thrawn*, Timothy Zahn chronicles the fateful events that launched the blue-skinned, red-eyed master of military strategy and lethal warfare into the highest realms of power—and infamy. **BUY IT NOW ON AMAZON IN PRINT, DIGITAL & AUDIOBOOK FORMATS.**



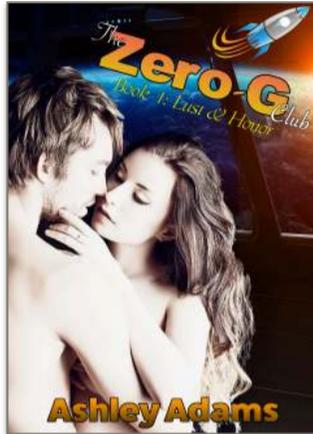
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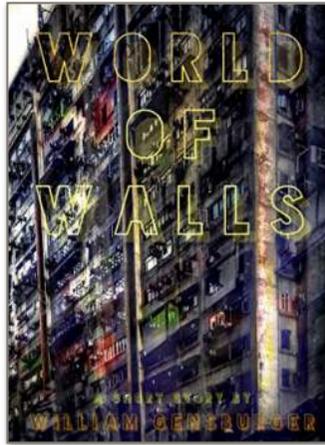


JUST A LITTLE DEATH

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Returning to his old boarding school as a new housemaster, David Wilson must come to turn with a terrible truth about his past, that still haunts him as he assumes his new role. *"This story is rich in detail, reminiscent of the language that masters of literature used. From the start I could see the setting with such clarity that I felt I was being painted into the story, such was its potency. A poignant look at innocence lost, and a hope for the future."* ~Juliette Marchelle, New York.

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In a dark and lonely world where the individual has been relegated to a small cubicle amongst millions of cubicles within a corporate enclave, where the individual is no longer important, and love an inconsequential emotion, Robert Yamato must come face to face with his destiny, as foretold by a hexagram, and make the most difficult choice of his life. *"A well-written story that compels the reader to stay until the end."* ~ Alexander Greene, reviewer.

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