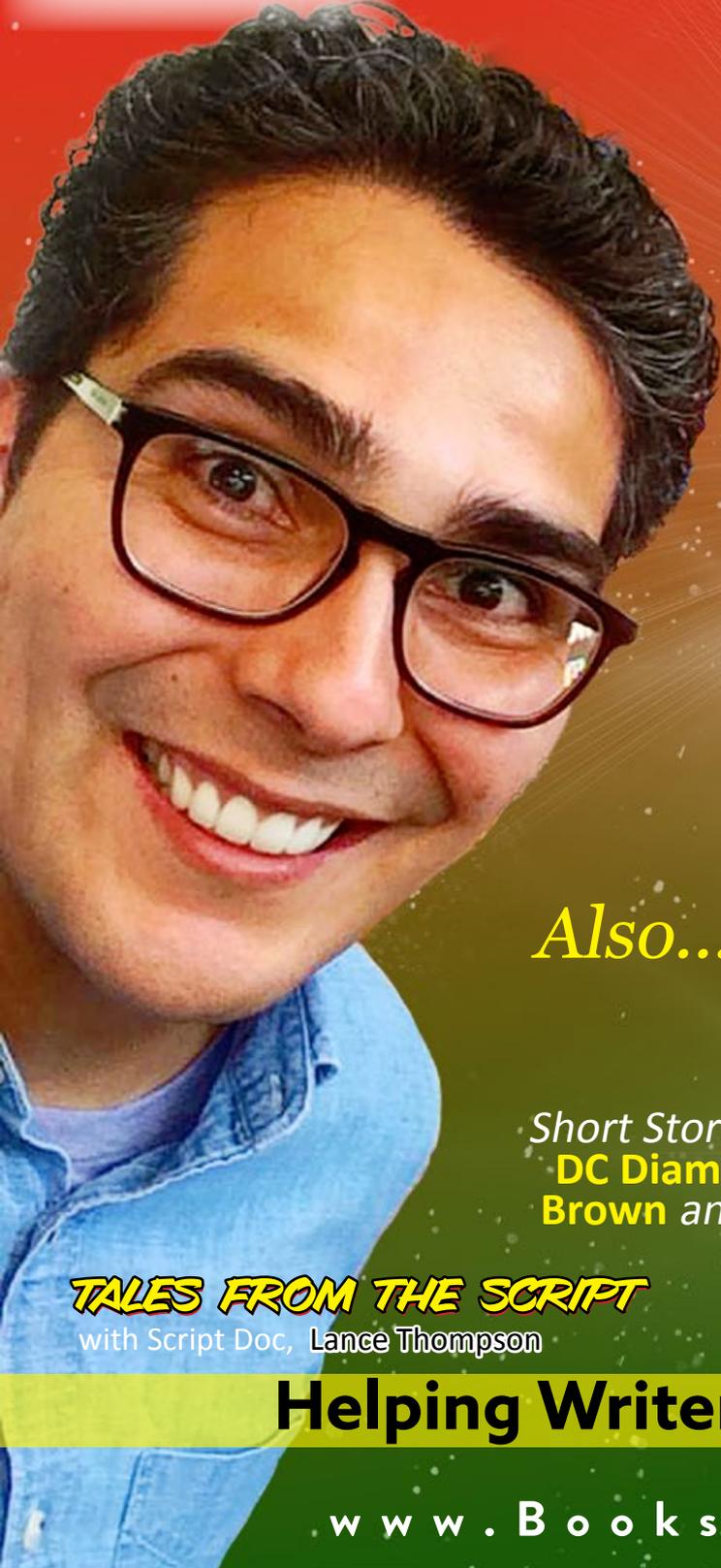


Writing Magazine

Final Issue:



FREDDY CRUZ

From Radio to Author.

'Allow Me To Ruin Your Christmas.'

Also...

Scott Overton

Changing a radio career into a writing career. More than just "Dead Air."

Short Stories from Jon Wesick, DC Diamondopolous, Kevin Brown and Brandon Barrows

TALES FROM THE SCRIPT

with Script Doc, Lance Thompson

And
Much
More
INSIDE

Helping Writers to Get Published



Writing Magazine



December 2022

A Big Thank You!

Another year!

And I have to share that **this is the final issue of Books & Pieces Magazine**. In this day and age it is very difficult to generate enough ad revenue for a specialized publication, and frankly, for the time it takes to gather material, edit, layout and publish, there is not enough revenue to warrant that outlay of time. I wish I could do it for free, but like you, there are bills that will not wait. You will still be able to access the website and stores and articles from past issues.

I have to take a moment to thank the many people who have helped make this magazine work. Jill Hedgecock, for her friendship, many book reviews, and some articles. Lance Thompson, for an excellent screenwriting column, 'Tales from the Script.' Mickey Mikkelson of Creative Edge Publicity for working with us and giving us access to many big name authors, and always being supportive. Julio Carlos for some book reviews early in the year, also a very supportive person. And Luc Thibaut, of Alt Publish, for publishing us. Alt Publish also publishes select authors—if you are interested visit AltPublish.com and send him an email. It's an honest company that profit shares with no costs to you. My books are published through Alt Publish.

Also, a thank you to the many writers who have submitted short stories this year. Do not be discouraged if we passed; writing is an evolution. Keep at it. And keep submitting.

And finally, to YOU, dear readers. You make it work. Many of you have sent email copies to friends, writers you know, and we encourage you to do so. It helps us to grow. And to survive in this crazy world, we need to reach more people. Thank you for your support.

If you are on our mailing list, you will receive one more email before the new year asking if you are interested in staying up to date with new authors, books, etc. This will come from Alt Publish. If not, simply unsubscribe and you won't be emailed again.

Wishing you a Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, or whatever you call this Season of Peace and Goodwill. And my hopes for a better 2023, saner, kinder, safer and something we can all enjoy.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'William Gensburger'.

William Gensburger
Author/Publisher

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SHORT STORY

BENIGNO FIGHTS THE BEAR

by Jon Wesick

The window fans blew ninety-degree air around the basement gym. Despite the heat, Benigno Rivera was glad to practice judo every afternoon at the university club. His opponent, Jim Cooper, was a big guy whose uniform smelled like gorgonzola.

Leaving a sweaty, unwashed judo gi to ferment in a locker for a week was lousy discipline. Why couldn't students wash them? Even after taking a shower, Benigno's hands would stink of the big guy's sweat. Cooper moved in for a hip throw. Benigno blocked it with a tai sabaki, stepped around, and executed a hip throw of his own. He landed on top of Cooper and moved into a scarf hold called kesa gatame. The big man tapped out.

"I'm going to take a break." Cooper did a standing bow.

"How are you going to compete with Wisconsin State if you don't train?" Benigno asked.

Cooper walked away so Benigno sat cross-legged at the edge of the mat, the back of his sweaty gi sticking to the concrete wall. He turned his attention from the randori to his broken toe that buddy-taped to its neighbor. The sticky wrestling mats were murder on bare feet. Canvas or tatami would have been better, but the judo club was lucky to have this space at all. Benigno had no worthy opponents here. Don Levine used to have a killer uchi mata but he'd lost his fire after knee surgery. With no one to replace Levine, Benigno couldn't

see how they'd make it to the nationals. The instructor, Arto Virtanen, a graduate student in Eastern European languages, clapped his hands to end class. The students knelt facing the teacher and bowed out.

"Ever seen one of those wrestling bears at the county fair?" Cooper asked Virtanen after class. "How could judo win against an opponent like that?"

"I know!" Benigno jumped to his feet. "When the bear rises up on his hind legs, I'd turn into a shoulder throw just as he comes down on top of me." Benigno dropped to his knees and demonstrated a seoi nage. "Yeah, fight the bear! Fight the bear!"

No one else chanted so Benigno jumped up and down in front of Levine while shouting, "Fight the bear! Fight the bear!"

A few others joined the chant. Virtanen shook his head and bowed out.

"Who is brave enough to challenge Harold the Horrible, master of Greco-Roman wrestling?" Flatty Gaff pointed to a black bear who looked like the cartoon character in Hamm's Beer commercial. As for Harold's trainer, Gaff

wore a ballcap, denim jacket and had a patchy beard shot with gray. “It’s just ten dollars to play for a chance to win five hundred. Who will be first?”

Benigno held up a ten and walked to the stage.

“Fight the bear!” Cooper shouted. He couldn’t wait to see the guy who’d dominated him in every practice get creamed. When he noticed Levine hadn’t joined in the chant, Cooper elbowed him in the ribs. The two then clapped and stomped to their chant, and the audience joined in. “Fight the bear!”

In martial arts, they say a ten-pound weight advantage is worth one degree of black belt. Harold the Horrible weighed three times as much as Benigno. Even Kyuzu Mifune wouldn’t have beaten the black bear. Well, maybe the judo master could have won but Benigno’s strategy went wrong from the start. Instead of rearing up, Harold stayed on four legs, forcing Benigno into a referee’s position. Benigno reached under the bear’s chest for the opposite foreleg, pressed his face against the fur, and pushed but he might as well have tried to push over a bulldozer. Harold rolled on top of him. Benigno struggled to breathe. He tried to lift his hips or scoot his legs out from under the animal but all he could do was smell the vodka and breath mints coming through Harold’s leather muzzle. Then he gambled on Harold being a wrestler. Benigno shimmied

and twisted until he was face down on the mat, a move that would get him killed in a real fight. However, wrestlers had to pin an opponent’s shoulders to win, and lying face down prevented that. The bear got off him.

“Let’s go, Benigno! You’ll get him this time.” Cooper suppressed a snigger. “Fight the bear! Fight the bear!”

On his feet again, Benigno heard laughter from the spectators. When Harold approached on four legs, Benigno stepped to the side. In the hot sun, the bear’s fur smelled like a thousand of Cooper’s rank judo gis. Benigno side-stepped another lunge and raised his arms in an attempt to get Harold to copy his motion. It worked.

“Ear!” Harold said as he reared up on his back legs. Benigno stepped in for a shoulder throw but couldn’t overcome the bear’s low center of mass. Harold simply turned to take Benigno down, and the judoka spent the rest of the match pinned under five-hundred pounds of fur. After watching Benigno’s defeat, neither Levine nor Cooper tried.

Benigno and Cooper handed their tickets to the tattooed man at the gate. He was wiry, his skin aged from heavy drinking, and he wore a grubby T-shirt with a pack of Marlboros rolled into the sleeve. In other words, his appearance did not inspire confidence that he could maintain dan-

gerous equipment. Nevertheless, Cooper had insisted they ride the Kamikaze. It consisted of a pair of counterrotating pendular that swung their occupants in three-hundred-sixty-degree arcs.

The two sat side-by-side in the gondola. The motor roared, and the pendular began to swing, slowly at first and then building up amplitude. Near the top of the arc, Benigno felt weightless as the gondola paused.

“Next one is the big one!” Cooper said.

The gondola swung back, gained amplitude, and climbed again.

“Woo!” Cooper pumped both fists in the air.

Benigno saw the world spin much like when someone threw him for ippon. After several more loops, the gondola slowed and came to rest.

“You gave it a damn good try.” Cooper slapped Benigno on the shoulder. “Want to get a beer?”

“Thanks. I think I’ll stick around for a while.” Benigno had other plans.

“Okay. See you at the dojo.”

Benigno bought a barbecued turkey leg and watermelon slushy. He wandered the fair but didn’t play any games. Eventually, he made his way between the trucks and vans to where the bear lived. Harold paced back and forth in a space the size of a kitchen that stank of urine. This was no way to treat a champion. Benigno slipped the turkey leg

between the iron bars to his former opponent. It was the least he could do.

Harold ambled to the cage door and took a French fry from Benigno's hand. Even past midnight, the air was warm and humid. The only sounds were crickets' love songs and the distant bass of reggae coming from a carny's trailer. Benigno cut the padlock's shackle with bolt cutters and unchained the gate.

"Earl!" Harold greeted him with a bear hug.

"Quiet." Benigno held a finger to his lips. "This way."

Harold followed Benigno past the rides, cotton candy tubs, milk bottle, and skeeball stands, and into the parking lot. It was a tight fit getting him into the passenger seat of Benigno's MGB convertible. The seatbelt was too short, and the bear's face stuck out a foot above the windscreen. A scally cap, muffler, and pair of goggles made Harold look jaunty on the ride back to the dorm. Halfway there, Benigno let the bear drive. Bad idea! Harold couldn't get the hang of the stick shift.

They parked behind the dorm, and Benigno smuggled the bear in the back door. While waiting for the elevator, he worried that the students in the lobby would notice that Harold was a bear, but the scally cap fooled them. The elevator arrived. Benigno led Harold inside and pushed the button for the twelfth floor.

"Wait up." The resident

assistant blocked the door. He entered, pushed the button for three, and looked at Harold. "No pets allowed."

"He's not a pet," Benigno said. "He's my cousin from Ulan Bator."

"Cousin, huh? What's his name?"

"Earl," Harold said.

"Kind of hairy. Isn't he?" The RA asked Benigno.

"On a cold Mongolian night when you're alone in your yurt with no woman around, you might reach for a yeti, too."

"Damn!"

"How do you think Genghis Khan conquered half the world?" Benigno asked.

"All right, Earl. Just keep the noise down. You might be on vacation but others need to study." The RA exited on the third floor.

Benigno realized Harold might be hungry. After turning on the TV, he made marmalade sandwiches, but Harold wouldn't touch them.

"Earl." Harold pointed at a bag of cheese curls.

Benigno poured them into a bowl, and soon Harold's snout was covered with orange powder.

"Have you seen this bear?" The announcer showed Harold's picture on the TV. "A few hours ago, Harold escaped from the Monroe County Fair. His owner is offering a two-thousand-dollar reward for his capture. Call 555-1975 if you have any information."

Benigno bowed before stepping onto the mat. Harold did the same. When Benigno had searched the Goodwill for disguises, he'd found a size-9 judo gi and decided his new friend should share his hobby. Rit dye turned Harold's belt brown, which gave him enough rank to compete without anyone asking him to teach.

"Who's our guest?" Virtanen asked.

"My cousin from Ulan Bator," Benigno replied.

"Arto Virtanen." He bowed and offered his hand.

"Earl." Harold took Virtanen's hand in his paw.

"You played judo for a long time, Earl?" Virtanen asked.

"Earl."

"Sorry," Benigno said. "He doesn't speak much English."

"Maybe you can translate for him," Virtanen said. "Glad you can join us, Earl."

After bowing in, Benigno partnered with Harold to practice o-goshi. The bear mimicked stepping in with a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn, reaching around Benigno's waist, and throwing him over his hip. Harold kept up as the class moved on to taiotoshi and o soto gari until it was time for randori, when Harold tossed Benigno around like a sack of Nerf balls.

"Dozo." Virtanen bowed to the bear when it was time to change partners.

The two struggled for a

dominant grip on each other's gis. Virtanen went for a simple armbar, but Harold sensed the trap. Virtanen then dropped into a taiotoshi but Harold stepped over his leg, pivoted, and attempted a hiza guruma knee wheel. Virtanen stepped over Harold's extended leg and countered with his own hiza guruma. Harold turned his hips away to stop the throw and swept Virtanen's feet from behind.

"Hey, you're pretty good!" Virtanen said as he got up from the mat.

After more randori and ending the class, Virtanen approached Benigno.

"You know, if your cousin registered for a continuing-education class, he could join the judo team. Then we might have a chance of showing up Dan Hickenlooper at Wisconsin State." Virtanen's rivalry with that coach had gone on for years.

"Damn it, sensei!" Cooper shouted. "Can't you see he's a bear?"

"Oh, yeah." Virtanen squinted at Harold. "Well, the NCAA has rules about athletes accepting money but nothing about them being bears."

Harold stepped onto the mat and bowed to his opponent, Darrell Hades, a judoka from Faber College whose three-hundred pounds compensated for a total lack of skill. To qualify as a student, Harold had registered, under the pseudonym Earl Oso, for a music-appreciation class.

The instructor assigned no homework. An essay at the end of the semester would determine his grade. No one on the judo team knew how a bear would write an essay but the national championships would be over by then, so the question was moot.

"Hajime!" yelled the referee to start Harold's first tournament match in the state semifinals.

Hades bellowed an earsplitting kiai and rushed forward like a Viking berserker on his way to a Texas barbecue. Harold did the same, and the two collided like two freight trains, one leaving Pittsburgh at 6:12 AM traveling at fifty-nine miles per hour, and the other departing Kansas City at 8:04 AM traveling forty-three miles per hour. Their clash was enough to bring joy to overburdened algebra students everywhere. Harold took Darrell down and cleaned the mat with him, literally. Using Darrell as a gi-covered washrag, Harold wiped him back and forth over the mat in a raster pattern. The judge declared Harold the winner.

All was not salmon and picnic baskets, though. Disguised in a trilby hat and fake mustache, Wisconsin State's coach, Dan Hickenlooper, watched from the bleachers. As a professor of wildlife biology, Hickenlooper suspected something about Virtanen's new judoka wasn't right.

With a gold medal around his neck, Benigno watched

Harold straighten his gi and step onto the podium to wait for Mr. Choi to present the awards in the open-weight category. An eighth dan who wore a red-and-white belt, Mr. Choi intimidated everyone with his six-foot-nine-inch height. Not only was he huge, but he was aggressive with flawless technique. When discussing being thrown by Mr. Choi, Levine had said, "He made me one with the mat."

After placing the silver medal on the second-place winner's neck, Mr. Choi stepped in front of Harold and stared as if remembering folktales from his childhood on Cheju Island. Bear and man bowed, and Mr. Choi placed the gold medal around Harold's neck. This clinched it. The seven judoka that Virtanen had molded into a team had outperformed all the others. Levine won gold, and Cooper had even washed his gi. They were going to the nationals.

Benigno took a seat in the bleachers to watch. As the odd man in his weight class, he'd advanced automatically to the second round. The eliminations took place on four mats at once, so Benigno had placed himself close to the 160-pound competition to study his opponents. The crowd roared. Benigno looked up to see Harold step onto a far mat. Then the crowd gasped. Harold's opponent was not a human but a rhino, not a moderate Republican but an actual member of rhinocerotidae diceros. Wis-

consin State hadn't even tried to find a judo gi big enough to cover the fifteen-hundred-pound animal. Instead, they'd wrapped his torso in white cotton. A yellow tennis ball covered his horn, and a seeing-eye bird called an ox-pecker sat on his shoulder.

"Time out!" Virtanen went to argue with the referee.

Judges surrounded the pair and, after much gesturing and hushed voices, ruled that while no rules forbade a rhino from competing, the bird could not join him on the mat.

"I'm going to sue under the Americans with Disabilities Act!" Hickenlooper shouted.

When the referee called "Hajime!" the rhino pawed the mat, lowered his head, and charged. Lacking the ox-pecker bird to give directions, he set off the wrong way. Momentum carried him into the front row of the bleachers occupied by Mrs. Tiergarten's first-grade class. After paramedics cleared the injured, the referee called a penalty against the rhino for stepping off the mat.

When the match resumed, Harold let out a roar to give his nearsighted opponent a direction. When the rhino charged, Harold stepped aside and stuck out a foot to trip the horny beast. Keeping to this strategy, Harold accumulated yuko after yuko, but he didn't want to win by partial points. As the timer ticked down, Harold baited his opponent into one more charge. When the rhino got close,

Harold tricked him into a turn. Harold stepped in with a hip throw and added a leg sweep to make it a harai goshi. No throw against an opponent that massive would be perfect but the referee called "Wazari!" earning Harold a respectable half-point and the match. The crowd cheered and then hushed as a grizzled man in a ballcap and denim jacket rose from the second row and pointed at Harold.

"That's my bear!" Flatty Gaff yelled.

As the police led Harold away in handcuffs, he gazed at Benigno and whimpered, "Earl."

"Which of you is brave enough to challenge the amazing fighting bear, master of Greco-Roman wrestling, judo, taekwondo, and krav maga? It's just ten dollars for a chance to win five hundred. Who will be first?"

"I will!" Benigno held up a ten-dollar bill and rushed to the stage.

He stepped onto the mat, bowed, and the match began. Harold rushed in on all fours and reaped Benigno's leg in an o soto gari. Benigno kept his legs between himself and the bear to avoid a pin and scrambled to his feet. He danced around the bear with ankle props and foot sweep and then pulled his earlobe. On the prearranged signal, Harold reared up, and Benigno pivoted, dropped to his knees, and tossed the bear over his shoulder. It was most-

ly show. Harold didn't take a dive, but he didn't resist either. Benigno scrambled on top for a kami shiho gatame pin.

"Winner!" Flatty Gaff handed Benigno a roll of ones with the twenties on the outside. "See! Everyone's got a chance. Who's next?"

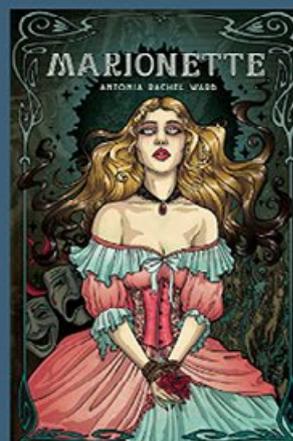
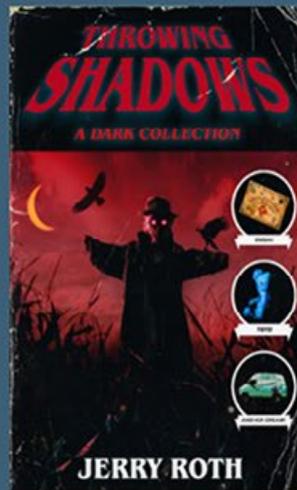
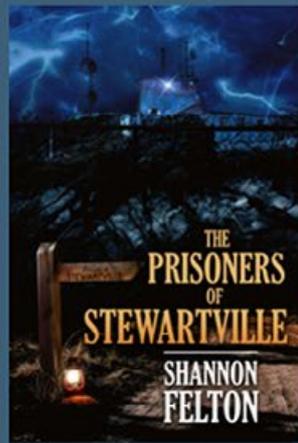
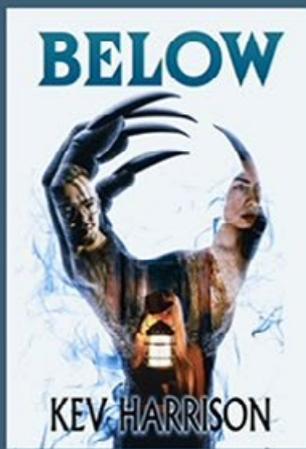
Of course, as the shill, Benigno would give the money back. That was the deal Flatty Gaff had insisted on to drop the chargers. Leaving college to join the fair beat going to prison. At least Benigno got to spend time with his ursine buddy and keep a third of the take. Besides, with enough practice, his shoulder throw might get good enough to take down a bear for real.

About the Author



Jon Wesick is a regional editor of the San Diego Poetry Annual. He's published hundreds of poems

and stories in journals such as the Atlanta Review, Berkeley Fiction Review, New Verse News, Paterson Literary Review, Pearl, Pirene's Fountain, Slipstream, Space and Time, and Tales of the Talisman. His most recent books are *The Shaman in the Library* and *The Prague Deception*. <http://jon-wesick.com>



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A CONVERSATION WITH...



Freddy Cruz is a Houston area author and host of Freddy's Huge ASK Podcast. He's obsessed with music, books, running, and coffee, and not necessarily in that order.

B&P: You've had 20 years in pop radio and decided that becoming an author was a great idea. What brought that about, and how did you make that happen?

FC: I've always been a storyteller. The gift of copywriting and sharing stories on the radio gave me longevity in an industry where many only last a few years. The decision to leave was more about reading the proverbial room. And just like our favorite books, all good things must come to an end.

B&P: 'Allow Me To Ruin Your Christmas' is a great title and works for our December issue. How did that come about, and what's the story about?

FC: During episode #43 of Freddy's Huge ASK Podcast, I spoke with bestselling author Tui T. Sutherland. She asked me about my work, and I revealed to her that the working title (at the time) was Allow Me to Ruin Your Christmas. She loved it. So I promoted it from a working title to an official title.

B&P: What's the best and worst part of writing?



FC: I love getting into a flow state. There's no other feeling on earth. At least to me, there isn't. That's the best part. The worst part comes when I can't access the flow state. That's when the demon of self-doubt starts chipping away at my creativity with his pick axe.

B&P: How does being an author compare to being a radio personality, and do you find that the latter benefits from your built-in audience in terms of readership?

FC: The creativity required of both always happens in solitude, before an audience of one. Me. Just like writing, creating a radio show—or, in my current situation, a podcast—is done alone. Not everyone writes alone, and there are shows with multiple characters, but I work alone. The success I've had as an author has come from advertising and PR (thanks, Mickey!).

B&P: What makes success for either an author or radio personality and how important is content or substance versus presence and popularity?

FC: Being a creator means being consistent. This means quality and quantity. There's a

reason why names like King and Baldacci are always top of mind. It's because they deliver both quality and quantity. And the same applies to any type of creative. Do you want to be a successful podcaster? Release three episodes per week instead of one. Do you want to grow your social media audience so they can buy your stuff or listen to your show? Post multiple times per day

per platform. Creativity is a muscle. Use it or lose it. Do bodybuilders end up with twenty-four-inch biceps because they only lift once a week? Nope. So get to work!

B&P: Several books in, what are your future plans?

FC: A fifth-anniversary edition of my debut novel *When America Fell Silent*. It'll have a new cover and bonus material. I'm in the early stages of development and look forward to seeing what some of my favorite characters have been up to.

B&P: Any advice for new authors?

FC: Write. The. Book. If you really want to have a story to your name, you must stop procrastinating and get it done. You owe it to your future self to do it. And you owe it to future readers who will be impacted by your story. They're waiting for you.

B&P: Anything you'd like to include not mentioned?

FC: Reading a book is a time commitment, the only thing we never get back. So I'd like to



extend a huge thank you to anyone who decides to read any of my books. And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Freddy's Huge ASK Podcast. Fans of TEDx and Masterclass can listen to over 1,500 minutes of interviews with people like former Navy SEAL Jack Carr and Auschwitz survivor Tova Friedman, among others.

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SHORT STORY

BLONDE NOIR

by DC Diamondopolous

Kit Covington sat on the sofa in her Pacific Palisades mansion with a cigarette lodged in the side of her mouth. A cloud of smoke floated around her head. She adjusted the oxygen tube in her nose, then brushed ash from her dog Muffin's champagne-colored curls. The miniature poodle dozing in Kit's lap startled when the camera crew from *The Great Morning Talk Show* banged equipment into Kit's antique furniture.

"Watch it! You scratch anything, you'll pay for the restoration." Since her left lung had been removed, Kit's husky voice had a rattle that lingered between words chaining them together like loose ball bearings.

"Sorry," the stocky, tattooed, sound woman said.

Kit wondered if the all-female crew was a set-up—some kind of knife-twisting in the gut. She'd been anxious about the interview and now regretted it.

Her son, Robin, urged her to confront the nonsense. The 1950s blonde bombshell became notorious because of some damn YouTube video a pop singer made by superimposing Kit's dance sequence from the 1956 movie, *I Was a Teenage SheWolf From Mars*, while he sang to her. It went viral. Paramount capitalized on it with a box set of her films. The Screen Actors Guild sent her checks she hadn't seen in sixty years.

Kit would have laughed at the male juvenile obsession with her big breasts, platinum blonde hair, and erotic gyrations in her bullet bra and tight sequined space suit. But it happened at the time actresses came forward and named producers, directors, and actors who raped and assaulted them. The video ignited a

firestorm of criticism from young women, who blamed her for their being sexualized. She became the poster girl, Adam's Eve, the anti-feminist, the target for all the ills cast upon womanhood—making her name Kit into a verb synonymous with "fucks for favors."

What a load of shit!

Kit had had enough after months of headlines, CNN pestering her old studio for her telephone number, and the tabloids offering money to anyone who had a recent picture of her.

Centerfolds, headshots, movie-posters, her sexy blonde images from the 50s were everywhere.

She chose *The Great Morning Talk Show* because Bridget Lundgren, the lawyer turned TV host, defended her on the show.

Muffin jumped from Kit's lap and wolfed a piece of jelly donut the beefy, spiked-haired, lighting woman had dropped.

"This isn't a barn! Use a napkin. That's a three-hundred-year-old Persian rug," Kit said.

"Sorry, Miss Covington."

Kit watched Lundgren scrutinize the pictures on the wall. She was a real fashion plate in

a navy pantsuit, with her short blonde hair tucked behind her ears. Kit tensed when the woman took a photograph from her carnival days off the wall and examined it, revealing a yellow nicotine outline. How dare she!

“Is this from the Gerling Carnival?” Lundgren asked.

“Could be,” Kit said surprised that Lundgren knew about her carny days.

Lundgren replaced it and moved to the photo of Kit riding bareback in The Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth, where she performed flips until she fell from the horse and broke her ankle.

Above the walk-in fireplace, Lundgren gazed at the huge painting of Kit by Willem deKooning. It was Kit’s favorite, by the artist who inspired her to take up painting. Completed in 1958 when she was twenty-five, the painting recalled the memory of sitting for hours, her back arched, her tits pointing to the North Star, pouty full lips, a halo of platinum blonde hair, and the moist come-hither look women still use to lure men into the bedroom.

“This is one of the few deKoonings I’ve seen that isn’t an abstract,” Lundgren said.

“He did others.”

“My favorite was the Woman series. I love how he broke rules.”

Kit puffed on her cigarette and flicked ash into a large serving dish sitting next to her. She wondered how much of the art world Lundgren knew. In person, Kit judged her as a cool and calculating woman, the way she inspected the pictures as if they hid the da Vinci code. Why not ask how all the hullabaloo affected her, how it made her irritable, critical, bitchy. She wondered if Lundgren had gone so far as to play nice-nice on TV—knowing Kit would be watching.

Outside the sliding screen door, she saw Robin watering the rose bushes. Since the operation, he’d been pestering her to stop smoking. She cut back from a four packs a day, to two and a half. What the hell did he

want? She’d been smoking since she was ten. When he tried to scare her with images on his phone of how the cancer could spread to the liver and kidneys, she grabbed the phone and threw it at him. She made him swear that when she died, he’d put her in a box, stick a cigarette in her mouth—preferably lit—and prod a lighter in her right hand.

“I can go without oxygen for four minutes,” Kit said. “So break. I don’t want these damn tubes on camera. I’ll need a cigarette—.”

“Your son told us.”

Miffed by Lundgren’s rudeness, Kit said, “When do we start?”

“In five minutes. Do you need to use the restroom?”

“My legs are cramping.” Kit struggled to rise, shooing Lundgren away when she tried to help. She stood and rolled the oxygen tank she called Sherman across the living room floor while pulling a pack of Winstons and a lighter from the pocket of her long flowing gypsy skirt.

“Aren’t you afraid of the tank exploding?” the sound woman asked as Kit wobbled by.

“No, I’m not. If I could walk a tightrope while on my period, I can roll a damn dolly while smoking a ciggie.”

The girl raised her eyebrows and turned away.

Robin saw her and slid open the screen.

“I don’t want to do this,” Kit said. “That woman’s going to ambush me.”

“C’mon mom, you liked her.”

“Not anymore. She snapped at me, ‘Your son told us,’” she mimicked.

Kit pushed past Robin and stood above her tiered English garden. Even with her fading sense of smell, she caught fragrances of her lemon and peach trees. Below the garden was a view overlooking Highway 1, Malibu, and the Pacific Ocean. She had bought the house in the fifties while pregnant with Robin and married his father Daniel soon after.

The April morning glistened as Catalina Island sat like a treasured cast-off from the mainland. Cast-off. When Kit hit her late twenties, it was over. No producer wanted to hire an old hag at thirty. Her agent got her jobs on TV, as a panel member on *To Tell the Truth*, *I've Got a Secret*, and her big whoop-de-doo, the center box on Hollywood Squares. In the 1970s, her agent dropped her.

"You signed a contract, Mom. Let people hear your story." He peered into the living room. "They're ready for your close-up."

Kit rolled her eyes. Robin was always quoting from *Sunset Blvd.*, *The Wizard of Oz*, or *All About Eve*. On occasion he'd dress in drag and perform dance numbers from *Cabaret*, *A Chorus Line*, and musicals she never heard of. Her boy knew how to make her laugh.

Kit counted five strangers in her house, eating, drinking coffee, moving her furniture, and using her bathroom. Well, at least they were women and wouldn't be pissing on the floor.

"We're ready, Miss Covington," the sound woman yelled.

"C'mon, Mom. It'll be fun."

"I look like an old beatnik."

"You are an old beatnik."

Kit's chuckle rumbled like a truck bouncing over potholes. She smoothed her long white hair with her ciggie hand. She hadn't worn lipstick or make-up in years. She lived in sandals and, before the operation, went barefoot.

Robin waited for Kit to enter, then slid the door behind him. Kit rolled Sherman to the couch and settled in. Muffin jumped in her lap and Jezebel the cat slinked around the sofa and nestled beside Kit.

"We'll open with the video," Lundgren said. "then cutaway for the interview."

"Why show that again?"

"It's the reason for the interview, Miss Covington."

How sucky, Kit thought. She wasn't ashamed. She just didn't like having to defend

herself.

"Everyone in the world has seen it."

"It's a lead in," Lundgren said.

Kit scowled at Robin. He came over and straightened the string of turquoise and silver beads that dangled from her neck.

"Quit fussing."

"Come out, come out, wherever you are and meet the young lady, who fell from a star," Robin whispered.

"Glinda the Good Witch," Kit mumbled.

Robin winked at her.

"Ready when you are, Bridget," the camerawoman said.

"Good morning. Today, we have a very special guest. Kit Covington. In case you've been living under a rock the last several months," Lundgren smiled, "we're going to play the video that's caused a sensation. Here's the Grammy-winning pop star, Walker, singing from the hit video, "You're My Dream Girl in the Night" along with Kit Covington from her movie, *I Was a Teenage SheWolf from Mars*."

The video played on a small monitor. Kit watched herself from the 1956 horror movie, dancing, spinning, cleavage bouncing, her generous ass stretching the satin on her sequined spacesuit. It was hard to imagine her wrinkled and shriveled body once had so much oomph and had been so sexy.

She took off the tube and laid it beside her.

The camerawoman pointed her finger, and Lundgren began.

"We're sitting in the home of Kit Covington, a movie actress known as the Queen of the Bs from the 1950s, who has become infamous for being the poster-girl for the sexualization of generations of women."

"That's a load of shit!" Kit said. "Why blame me? Women have always used their bodies to get what they want. As if women didn't fuck before 1956."

Lundgren's jaw dropped. Seconds went by

before she made the throat-slash sign with her hand.

Kit coughed and hacked. Muffin jumped on the floor. Jezebel leaped from the sofa and ran around the couch. Kit took the tube and fastened the nasal cannula inside her nostrils, then lighted up a Winston. She inhaled and glanced at the stunned crew and Lundgren. Robin, with his eyes popping and mouth opened, reminded her of Joan Crawford in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*.

“You can’t swear on TV,” Lundgren said.

Kit glanced at her, looked away, and flicked ash into the dish. It was a knee-jerk reaction, a build-up from the last several months. Also, she wasn’t convinced Lundgren was on her side.

“You can’t go off the rails like that, Miss Covington. It won’t help you.”

“Infamous. Sexualization. Men sexualize women. Who’s head of advertising? They use sex to sell hamburgers, anything. Look at films! Who runs the networks?”

“It’s a lead-in,” Lundgren said.

“I’ve been assaulted and harassed like all those women. I don’t blame anyone but the shits who hurt me.” Kit blew smoke at the side of Lundgren’s face. “How dare you judge me.”

Lundgren waved away the smoke. “I’m not, Miss Covington. Not at all.” Jezebel arched her back and rubbed against Lundgren’s leg.

Kit crushed the cigarette into the plate. She narrowed her gaze at the blonde, who with her furrowed brow and the gentle way she stroked and caressed Jezebel, didn’t fool Kit. Behind Lundgren’s look of compassion was a frozen dish of ambition.

“Would you like to try it again?” Lundgren said.

Kit caught the rapport—the way Lundgren and Robin shot glances at each other— and now her cat had turned traitor.

She took off the oxygen tube. “Muffin.” The poodle ran to her and leaped in her lap. Robin

sat at the far end of the couch.

“We’re ready,” the camerawoman said.

Lundgren looked into the camera.

“We’re here with Kit Covington. Known in the 1950s as Queen of the Bs, she has made a scandalizing comeback—.”

“Scandalizing! That’s nothing compared to the shit I see on HBO.”

Lundgren made the throat-slash sign and stood from the sofa.

“We need to take a break.”

“We sure as hell do.” Kit attached the oxygen tube and rose from the couch. Muffin bounded to the floor. Kit wheeled Sherman to the screen door, shooing Robin away, opened it, and went outside.

“Mom?”

Kit ignored him. She wheeled Sherman down the ramp while lighting a cigarette.

She and her boy had been snookered into believing Lundgren was on her side. “Scandalizing,” she mumbled. What did Lundgren know about the life of a girl in the 1940s? Those young punks don’t know a damn thing about what life was like before they were born.

She clamped the ciggie in the corner of her mouth and steered the wheels over the yellow bricks Robin had laid that led down to her studio. She’d shut the door, pick up her pallet and brush, and lose herself as she disappeared into her painting.

The white stucco building, with red bougainvillea blooming against the side of the wall, inspired the artist in Kit. She painted color in splashes and dashes, mix-matching paint, blending oil, watercolor, and charcoal onto the canvases. Entering her studio was the closest thing to going to church. It was a place where her creativity transported and elated her.

She mashed the cigarette into the standing ashtray outside. The galleries complained of having to clean her canvas’. To show her how the smoke diminished her work, Robin took a moist cloth and gently wiped a painting. The

rag turned yellow. Without the cover of nicotine, the colors burst with vitality. It was a huge sacrifice not to smoke while she painted, but for her art, she would do anything.

Kit went into her sanctuary, the studio overlooking her cactus garden. Rows of tall windows allowed light to stream in. And where there weren't windows, her imagination decorated the walls. Robin had constructed built-ins for stacking paintings, nooks for brushes and paints, a worktable with drawers. Her boy built the studio exactly how she insisted.

In the late 1980s, Robin went behind her back and entered her work in contests. Furious by Robin's betrayal, even when she won, she wouldn't talk to him for days. He adored being the son of a movie star, but being her art agent satisfied both his nurturing and dramatic nature. He arranged her exhibits at MoMA, the Whitney, and others, with as much flare as his once movie star mother. He made deals so her work hung in The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Prado.

From the beginning she signed her work D. L. Hawkins, after Robin's father, leaving off his last name, Sutton. He lived his forty-four years as an art form, free and spontaneous, he danced when other men walked. My God how she missed him.

Kit made a fortune from her paintings, donating millions of dollars to art institutes. Who would take her seriously if they knew the esteemed D. L. Hawkins was once a second-rate sex-kitten?

Kit shut the door against the world. It hurt having those young women wrongly judge her. She knew what women went through, especially young women. Mad at herself for being so sensitive, she hated to admit that she cared what others thought of her.

"I knocked but you didn't answer."

Kit turned so fast the oxygen cannula pulled at her nostrils.

The blonde talk show host stood in the doorway, holding Muffin. Lundgren wore the same expression—open mouth, wide eyes—as when

Kit dropped the f-bomb.

"Oh my God. I don't believe it."

"I'm not doing the interview," Kit said.

Lundgren gazed at the art on the walls. "Neither am I, Miss Covington."

"Then why are you here? And why are you holding my dog?"

"I followed Muffin," Lundgren said, releasing the poodle. "She brought me here."

"Fink," Kit said, glaring at the dog.

"I wanted to let you know I cancelled." Lundgren continued to stare at the art and the unfinished oil painting on the easel. "And to say goodbye." Lundgren shook her head. "I can't believe it," she said, looking at a pastel that leaned against the wall. "I'm standing in D.L. Hawkins's studio."

Kit hacked, "Th—This is," she stuttered, "private."

"I'm sorry. I swear—swear, I won't mention a word to anyone. Are you and Hawkins an item?" she said, glancing at Muffin's bed and water dish in the corner.

Shaking, startled by the intrusion into her secret life, Kit watched dumbfounded as Lundgren made a b-line to the easel.

"You, you're not supposed—." Kit stammered.

"A merry-go-round, where the horses are riding the people."

Didn't Lundgren hear her? Just barged her way into D. L.'s studio as if Kit didn't exist. She shuffled across the wooden floor, shoving Sherman over to the easel.

Lundgren angled her head. "Animal cruelty. It's amazing to me how Hawkins takes an idea and turns it on its head. I saw his exhibit at MoMA when I did my post-graduate work. Blew me away."

"You know his work?"

"I majored in art. Didn't have the talent, so I changed to law." Lundgren leaned into the unfinished painting. "He tells a story with

brush strokes. What a genius.” She looked at Kit. “I know he’s a recluse, but I’d be honored to meet him.”

It reminded Kit of when Robin told her how critics and docents praised her work at exhibits. But to have someone stand in her studio and express how her art touched them, well, it made her—happy.

“He uses horses a lot,” Lundgren said. “My favorite is the Equine Series. You can feel the movement, hear the hooves beating against the ground.”

Kit was impressed by the woman’s knowledge, her trained eye.

“Where did you meet? In the carnival, or circus? It must have been a hard life.”

“Not as bad as home. Carnival came to town, and I ran away. Fourteen years old, a hoochie-coochie girl. It was roughest on the animals and freaks. In 1948, no jobs for women, but I survived.” Kit hadn’t talked about her life with the carny for years. But like Lundgren said, it showed up in her work, often with horses. “The circus. Then the pin-ups and movies. I survived that too. Not like the other blonde bombshells. So many died— suicides, over doses. Jayne Mansfield was killed in a car crash.” Kit felt fatigued. “Yes,” she nodded, “I survived that life, too.”

Lundgren listened, but Kit observed her inching her way toward the collage series on the worktable.

“This is an incredible studio. The lighting. High ceilings. Skylights. Everything an artist could dream of. Makes me want to paint again.” Lundgren glanced at Muffin lapping water from her bowl and then settle into her bed.

Kit flinched when Lundgren spotted her pink paw-patterned smock draped over the back of a chair and the unopened pack of Winstons on the work table.

Lundgren turned slowly. She didn’t look at her, just stared off. Kit experienced a shock of her own. She saw Lundgren putting it all to-

gether— amazement, then the revelation. Oh shit! What could Kit do about it? Kill her?

Lundgren tidied her short blonde hair behind her ears.

“I need a cigarette.” Kit wheeled Sherman toward the door. “C’mon Lundgren. D. L. wouldn’t want anyone but me alone with his work,” she said, making light of a moment that changed both their lives.

Muffin ran out the door. Kit looked over her shoulder. “You coming?”

Their eyes met. Lundgren’s were filled with tears.

“I’m tired. I need to sit down. Coming?”

Kit and Muffin walked down the path to the cactus garden. She figured Lundgren was somewhere behind. Tears. She knew them well. But when others cried, it put her at a disadvantage, made her feel mushy. And the young woman looked so beautiful standing in her studio with the sunlight catching every nuance of understanding that passed over her face.

Kit sat on a wrought iron bench, pulled Sherman close, lighted up, and surveyed her garden.

On a lookout, atop the Palisades, her nearest neighbor somewhere below, she really was a recluse. At eighty-five, with death a kiss away, she’d been angry for decades, for her stepfather’s abuse, Daniel’s death, even the small slights, building on top of one another making her view of life a vista of loneliness.

Muffin whined. Kit looked up and saw Lundgren. Muffin jumped up on her hind legs begging Lundgren to pick her up. The woman crouched down, petted Muffin, and looked at Kit.

She nodded.

“I have two silkies, I bet she smells them.”

“It’s more than that.” Kit’s voice had the tired monotony of a flat tire. It wasn’t even noon and she needed a nap. She coughed, hacked, and spit out a glob of phlegm. “Excuse

me.” Kit took out her handkerchief and wiped her mouth. “I’m not used to company,” she said and continued to smoke.

“Hey, Mom,” Robin yelled from the top of the garden path, “is everything okay?”

“Yes,” Lundgren answered for her. “Tell the crew I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

Lundgren handed Muffin to Kit and walked around the garden. Her hair was tousled by the breeze.

Kit preferred her like this—mussed. She wondered what the woman looked like at home, in jeans and a T-shirt. Lundgren walked through the narrow aisles, inspecting the plants.

“They’re beautiful how they bloom,” she said. “Like a miracle. I love the subtlety of the color, the shape, how the sunlight captures the unexposed side of the petals.”

Kit remembered how Lundgren studied the photos on the wall. She was sensitive, with an artist’s eye. Maybe she wasn’t going to exploit her after all. The pretty blonde with the slender build must have put up with a lot of sexual harassment. If so, Kit doubted she’d share any of it with her. She thought of Lundgren as quiet, low-key, except when she talked about D. L. Hawkins, then she herself bloomed.

“I understand why you had to choose a pseudonym,” Lundgren said with her back still to Kit. She turned. “I can’t imagine what you went through.” Lundgren walked over and sat next to her. “Not just your generation. My mother had me young. My father ran off and the only way she could keep me and get an education was to dance in strip clubs. She made a good living. That was the 1980s. It’s still hard.”

The two women gazed at the garden with the Pacific as a backdrop.

“There’s a way to make everyone forget about your video,” Lundgren said.

Kit took a deep inhalation of oxygen, closed her eyes, and savored her last moments as D. L. Hawkins. It was her little champagne-col-

ored poodle who had pulled back the curtain and revealed her identity—Muffin, leading Lundgren down the path to her door, giving her away.

Kit could see it now. Robin would take off her oxygen tube and dance her around the living room, overjoyed that his mom would be coming out of the closet. The thought of his endless euphoria exhausted her, but Lundgren was right. It would wipe that stupid video off the networks and change her name from a verb back to a noun.

She stubbed out her Winston. Leaning on Lundgren, she struggled to her feet.

“I’m going to lie down. Run this by Robin. You guys work out the details. But tell him not to wake me until three. And I’ll want my martini extra dry.”

Kit shuffled along. She pulled Sherman as the wheels made clap-clap sounds over the yellow brick path, with Lundgren beside her and Muffin running ahead.

About the Author



DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story, and flash fiction writer with over 300 stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC’s stories have appeared in: Penmen Review, Progenitor, 34th Parallel, So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library, Lunch Ticket, and others. DC was nominated twice in 2020 for the Pushcart Prize and in 2020 and 2017 for Sundress Publications’ Best of the Net. DC’s short story collection *Stepping Up* is published by Impspired. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals. dcdiamondopolous.com

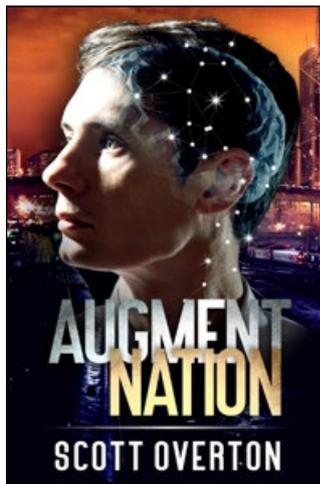
A CONVERSATION WITH...

SCOTT OVERTON

As the host of a radio morning show for most of his 30 years in broadcasting, Scott Overton has turned his skills to writing compelling near-future visions full of human potential and a sense of wonder.

B&P: You were a morning radio personality for 30 years. What made you decide to switch careers and why did you choose being an author?

SO: All my life there was never any question that I wanted to be an author. I tried to do it full-time for a year right after graduating university, but I couldn't stick it out financially long enough to become any good. I turned to radio because it fit my skills and interests and at least offered a steady paycheck. But there came a time when I just had to write, even while working full-time at a



demanding job, which is why my first novel, *Dead Air* (set in the radio business), took five years to write. During that time, our radio station was sold, I was let go, and my severance package provided the opportunity to take a leap of faith and try making a go of

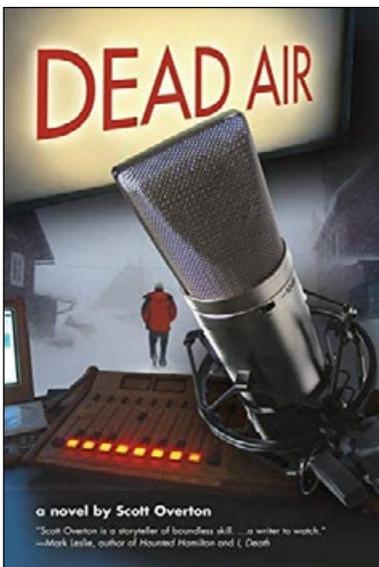
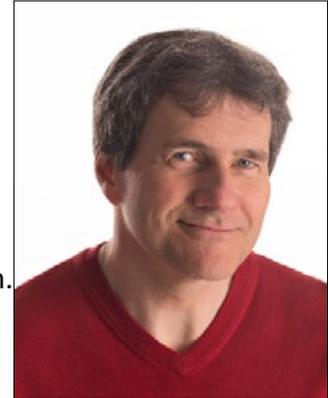
writing again. By then I'd experienced a lot more of life, read a lot, had some great mentors and taken many, many opportunities to learn my craft.

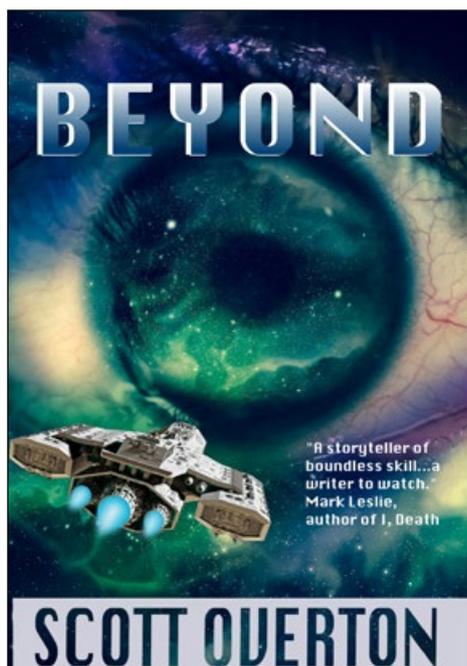
B&P: What was that transition like?

SO: It was a huge, scary risk, but my wife was, and is, incredibly supportive. Then, just before *Dead Air* was to be published, another local radio station hired me and restored my financial safety net for about 2 ½ years. But again, it set me up for walking the tightrope of being a full-time author. Mind you, the author's ever-present fear of failure is all the deeper when you don't have any money coming in. It's a pervasive feeling of, "What the hell am I doing? I need a steady paycheck!" For all that self-help gurus tell us to follow our bliss and find a job we love, our society really pushes against that. There's a strong attitude that it can't be a real job if you don't dread going back to it on Monday. So a writer just starting out can have a lot of guilt, feeling as if you're playing hooky from school.

B&P: How many books have you written? (I know that you have 15 short stories in an anthology).

SO: I wrote quite a number of science fiction





and fantasy short stories to build a track record and was able to get most of them published. Later, I turned fifteen stories into mini-e-book collections to

have something inexpensive for readers to buy, and eventually collected them into a print book. As for novels, after *Dead Air* I turned to science fiction, which was always my first love, and I've now published four SF novels. *The Primus Labyrinth* takes the reader through the human bloodstream, *Naïda* involves an alien symbiote, *The Dispossession of Dylan Knox* weaves together time, space, multiple personalities, and political intrigue, and *Augment Nation* is about computerized brain augments giving a direct mind-to-internet connection.

B&P: Your novels covers wide range of topics with both a contemporary twist and an eclectic focus (ie: romance-sci-fi). Is there an underlying theme that connects these or is it just areas that interest you, or ideas that seemed to be strong enough to write about?

SO: All four of my novels so far are connected in that their themes strongly involve human consciousness in one way or another, but that wasn't deliberate. It's just a topic that fascinates me—it's so wide-ranging and no one understands it, no matter what they say. But each novel was also written around its own specific theme and concept. I always start with

an intriguing concept and an important theme and create the novel from there. For instance, *Dead Air* is about the vulnerability of media personalities, *The Primus Labyrinth* explores the sanctity of the human body, *Naïda* asks how much a person can be changed and still be human, and *Augment Nation* questions consumerism, privacy issues, and the unprecedented access into our lives that we now give to companies in return for convenience. [We discuss *The Dispossession of Dylan Knox* below.]

B&P: You also narrate audiobooks. Do you find it more exacting to record your own books as opposed to another author?

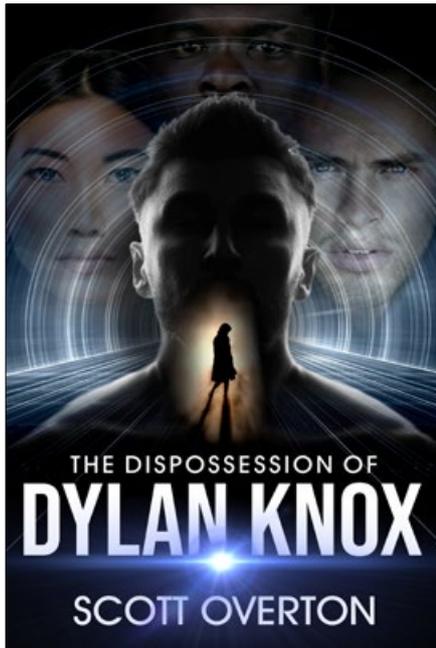
SO: I'm a perfectionist in both cases, so it's a big commitment of time and effort. So much so that I haven't produced audio versions of much of my own work, though I've promised myself to tackle that this winter. We'll see.

B&P: Please describe your typical writing day. Any habits or routines?

SO: Lately, far too much of my time is taken up with publishing and marketing tasks, but my ideal writing day sees me at the keyboard all morning, I take a break in the afternoon, and then go to it again for a couple of hours in the evening. Evenings used to be the only times I could write while working full-time, but sometimes your energy levels are low by then, and the internet becomes a strong temptation.

B&P: You've been compared to Dan Brown and Michael Crichton in your style. DO you agree and if so why?

SO: I'm not as sure about the Dan Brown comparison—I think it's because my books have action but also unknown elements to bring to light. Michael Crichton? Yes, definitely. Crichton used science-related present-day or near-future concepts and then took readers on exciting journeys. I call my novels science fiction thrillers, and although I've never tried



to imitate Crichton, or any other writer, I'm very flattered by the comparison because I admire him greatly.

B&P: What's the worst part of writing a novel, and how do you overcome that?

SO: It doesn't matter how many you've written, or how much readers praise them, you always have serious doubts about whether they're any good, especially each work-in-progress. To make each book as good as it can be, I ask beta readers to give feedback, and I work with a freelance editor whose opinions I trust. That still doesn't remove the doubts entirely—you just have to trust your instincts. I've always been a voracious reader and I know what I like to read, so I try to meet those same standards.

B&P: Your latest is a romance science fiction book. How did that come about and do you see a strong audience pull for that category?

SO: (Actually, *Augment Nation* is my latest, but you're probably thinking of the one before that, *The Dispossession of Dylan Knox*.) I always include a love story in my novels because I like them. But *The Dispossession of Dylan Knox* brings that front and center. I wondered what would happen if, through an accident, a human body really came to have multiple personalities in it—actual different individuals, not divisions of the original person's own mind. And I saw that it would be a perfect way to explore the age-old question: who do we

really fall in love with? The person we see, or who they are inside?

I think readers could absolutely take this book into their hearts, once word gets around, but it hasn't been discovered much yet because the premise is a little tougher to explain.

B&P: Any advice for new authors?

SO: So many people think they want to write a book someday, but those who are truly meant to be authors will know because they won't be able to not write. It'll be a labor of love that will persist no matter the obstacles, sacrifices, doomsayers, and sheer effort required. It is hard. You can't count on making any money. And the self-doubts can be brutal. But there's nothing like holding that book in your hands and having a reader tell you how much they loved it.

B&P: Any question I have not asked you would like addressed?

SO: No, we should stop. Otherwise I could fill the whole magazine! But readers can learn everything about me and my books, and how to buy them, by checking out my website www.scottoverton.ca.

Scott Overton, author of *Augment Nation*, *The Dispossession of Dylan Knox*, *Naïda*, and *The Primus Labyrinth*

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SHORT STORY

Magic Palm

by Kevin Brown

An angel, Grandmother would say, saved her life during a four-story suicide jump the year China went Red. Me on her lap, she told me how she toed the ledge, stared out at the network of alleyways smothered in smoke and screams and men tearing through men and manmade.

How she leaned forward, and the landscape fell up, toward and past her. How Kuan Shih Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, appeared and placed a palm beneath her. Whispered, "The Earth shall keep spinning. Spin with it," and eased her to the ground. "I broke a leg and both arms," she said, raising two gnarled fingers, "but it was magical."

I'd cry when she told me about Grandfather, whom she hadn't seen since the day he was taken away. He'd been a politician in the Nationalist Government and so was imprisoned for life. "They took my possessions," she said, "then my husband. Forced me to bow and confess against him to avoid his immediate execution." She'd stare ahead. "Last time I heard his voice, he was screaming mine and your mother's names as they drug him away." She'd blink several times, and I could see the image dissipating, melting into the now. "We were helpless in a country that needed help," she said. "Unable to save those who needed saving."

Years later, we returned to the location of her old house, but it was gone, replaced by an office building. Grandmother only smiled and said, "Prettier than it used to be."

She died shortly after. As she was lowered into the ground, I asked Mother if she believed a Deva really saved her.

"I don't not believe it," Mother said.

I was married later that year, and each time I looked at my husband, I'd think of Grandmother's story. How hard it must've been to have everything one second and be bowing as it is dragged away the next. How easy it'd be to jump. How hard to climb down?

So I mentally recorded my husband's voice, and his smells. Behind my eyes, I imprinted his shape and face. Then, on June 4th, 1989, he was killed in Tiananmen Square when a tank rolled between us and has never moved since.

A week later, I stood on my four-story ledge with a bottle of prescription

-pills. Toed the edge and looked out at my mental vision of the world, a network of

alleyways that all led to the same dead end. At everyone helpless in a country that

needed help. I missed my husband. Wanted to see Grandmother arm-in-arm with

Grandfather, the memories of forced bows and screams erased forever. So I jumped by

swallowing every pill. Felt the landscape fall up, toward and past me, until my angel, my

Goddess of Mercy, my grandmother appeared and placed a withered palm beneath me.

Whispered: “The world shall keep spinning. Spin with it,” and eased me to the ground, where I vomited, and it was magical.

About the Author:



Kevin Brown has had fiction and poetry published in multiple Literary Journals, Magazines and Anthologies. He won nu-

merous writing competitions, fellowships, and grants, and was nominated for three Pushcart Prizes, and twice for The Best American Short Stories. He co-wrote the film *Living Dark* which won a Moondance Film Festival Award and was sold to New Films International and collaborated on a television pilot with Linda Bloodworth (Designing Women Creator).

SHORT STORY

The Longest Way Home

by Brandon Barrows

Mina stood on the bridge, looking down at the river. Mist swirled around the banks, making it seem like the shore was moving rather than the water. During the day, it was muddy brown, but now, it was blacker than the night. It reminded her of a curtain, pulled after the final act of a play. “All the world’s a stage,” she whispered. She loved the sound of that line when she was a little girl.

The whoop of a siren made her jump. She turned on her heel, pressing her back against the railing. The police cruiser’s passenger window rolled down. “Everything okay, ma’am?”

The officer’s face was blank as his eyes scanned her, trying to fit her into some familiar box.

A light drizzle started to fall as she said, “Yes, I’m fine, thanks,” and began walking towards the near side of the bridge.

“You should get home,” the officer called after her. “It’s a nasty night.” He rolled up the window but the cruiser didn’t start moving until Mina was safely off the bridge.

Home, Mina thought bitterly. “Home” was a town in Vermont called Sharon, not the three paint-peeling rooms where she slept.

At the next corner, Mina pulled the envelope from her coat pocket and dropped it into the mailbox. It was so old-fashioned it seemed almost foreign. Writing so much by hand was awkward and left her fingers cramped, but an email or a text was too impersonal for something like this. Cramps were nothing, though. She put up with a lot worse over the last four years – the drunken rages, the slaps that became beatings. Besides, she had to let mom and dad know about Ben, the grandson they’d never even met. When everything was said and done, he would end up with them. She walked on through the night.

The next cross-street was busy, even close to midnight. Cars and trucks and the occasional bus zoomed past, sending up dirty spray that splashed the sidewalk. The movement, the red and gold lights through the rain and mist,

was mesmerizing. She stood a moment watching, wondering how many cars there were in the city. Unlike her, they were all going somewhere, every day, every hour.

“Miss,” a soft voice near her elbow said. “It isn’t safe to stand so close to the edge.”

Mina looked down and met the eyes of an elderly woman not even five feet tall. She reminded Mina of her great-grandmother, who was so tiny Mina called her “Little Grammy” when she was a child. A lump formed in her throat and her eyes burned.

“You’re right. Thank you, ma’am,” she said. At the light, the two of them crossed together.

The drugstore on the next block was still open. Mina blinked as she passed into the brightly lit store. “Can I help you, ma’am?” a clerk called out.

Mina went to the counter and asked for the strongest sleeping pills they sold without a prescription. “And a bottle of vodka, please.”

The man gave her a strange look for a moment, but only asked to see her ID. She presented it, paid, and put both box and bottle into her pocket.

“Have a nice night, ma’am,” the clerk told her, but got no

answer.

Mina unlocked the faded green door of her own building, and climbed creaking stairs to the third floor. Inside the apartment, she shed her coat, and went into the kitchen. Opening the box of pills, she popped each one from its foil pocket, making a pile on the scarred plastic table. With the base of the vodka bottle, she ground the pile into a fine powder. She cracked the seal on the bottle, took a deep swig, set it down. Scooping the white powder into her hand, she slowly poured it into the neck of the bottle, careful not to lose any, then recapped and shook it. The liquid was a little cloudy now, but it didn’t matter.

Mina moved through the living room quietly, careful not to disturb the little boy asleep

on the sofa. In the bedroom, she shook the sleeping man awake. “Here, I got your bottle, just like you asked.”

About the Author:



Brandon Barrows is the author of several novels, most recently 3rd LAW:

MIXED MAGICAL ARTS, a YA urban fantasy, and over one-hundred published stories, mostly crime, mystery, and westerns. He is a two-time Mustang Award finalist and a 2022 Derringer Award nominee. Find more at <http://www.brandonbarrowscomics.com> and on Twitter @BrandonBarrows

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TALES FROM THE SCRIPT

Observations and Opinions on Screenwriting by
script doctor LANCE THOMPSON

Pitch Perfect

The pitch is something that many writers fear because it seems difficult and mysterious. But it can be one of the writer's greatest aids.

Director Alfred Hitchcock always worked closely with his writers, meeting day after day to write and rewrite and polish the scripts for his movies. At the beginning of each session, Hitchcock wouldn't say, "Let's look at the outline," or "Let's read the pages from yesterday," or "Let's go over scene 16 again." He would settle in for the meeting with the writer, sit back in his chair, and say, "Tell me the story so far." Because stories are meant to be told. That is exactly what a pitch is.

A pitch is storytelling at its finest. As a producer told me after one of my first and certainly least inspiring pitches, "A pitch is a performance." It is conceived, practiced and honed over time so that it becomes effortless and intriguing. The writer in a pitch must weave a story so compelling that the person hearing the pitch can't wait to tell it to somebody else. That's how the idea moves from the first development person up the ladder to someone who can make the project happen.

A screenwriter, if he or she is lucky, will have countless opportunities to pitch a story before, during, and after writing it. Whether it's thirty seconds in an elevator, a couple of minutes on an airport shuttle, or a leisurely ten minutes in an office, every chance to pitch is an opportunity to test the story. Pitching face to face is the best way to test drive a tale. By the listener's reaction you can see where the story works and where it doesn't. If the listener is

Log Line	Al Bundy is a misanthropic women's shoe salesman with a miserable life. He hates his job, his wife is lazy, his son is dysfunctional (especially with women), and his daughter is dim-witted and promiscuous.
	Brief summary of your idea not more than 3 sentences.
Synopsis	Al Bundy is a unsuccessful middle aged shoe salesman with a miserable life and an equally dysfunctional family. He has a very attractive but lazy wife named Peggy who constantly nags him to death while throwing the little money he earns away on herself. He also has a very promiscuous teen aged daughter named Kelly who makes up in attractiveness what she lacks in IQ points, and a not so attractive but bright teen aged son named Bud who seems to think he is a ladies man. To add to Al's misery is his yuppie next door neighbors Marcy and Steve. Marcy and Steve eventually split up with Marcy keeping the house next door to the Bundy's and Steve moving away to be a forest ranger. Later Marcy gets remarried to a gigolo named Jefferson who is the male version of Peggy. The sitcom revolves around Al's never ending attempts to better his life which always leads him right back to where he started.
	- Describe your idea. (Approximately 3 paragraphs)

Sample pitch for TV show: Courtesy <https://www.moviepitcher.com/>

on the edge of his seat, anxious to hear what happens next, that part should stay in the story. If she's glancing at her phone or seeing who else is at the party, get rid of that element of the script. Everybody who listens to your pitch is a one-person focus group.

With each successive pitch, you will improve your story, taking out what doesn't hold an audience's interest and accentuating what intrigues, entertains or excites. Sometimes minor adjustments are necessary. Other times you tear out an entire act, get rid of a major character, or start over from page one. Either way, you are learning how to beguile an audience with your story.

Practice telling your story and perfect your pitch. It is one of the greatest tools a writer has. So get in there and pitch.

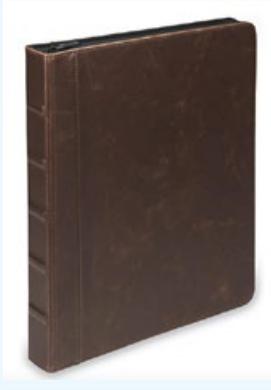
Lance Thompson is a script doctor, ghost writer and actor. He can be reached at script-doc88@gmail.com.

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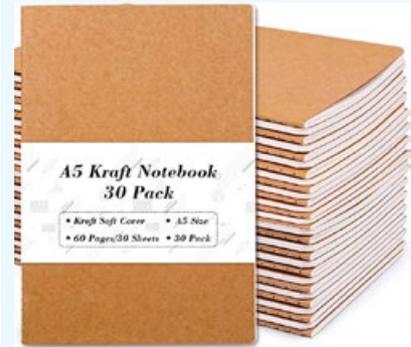
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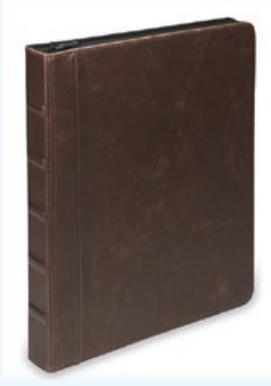


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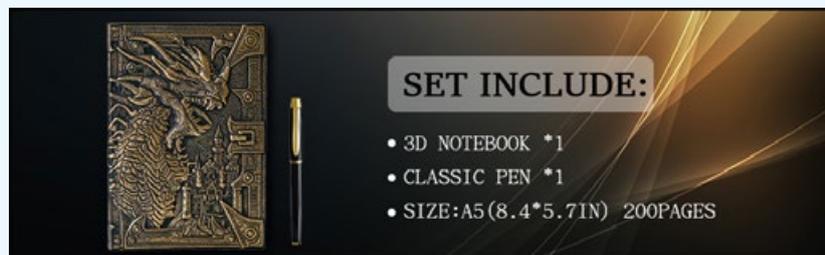
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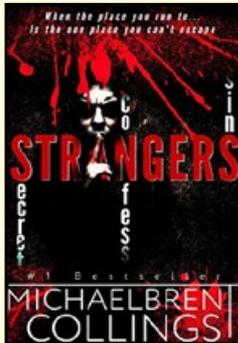
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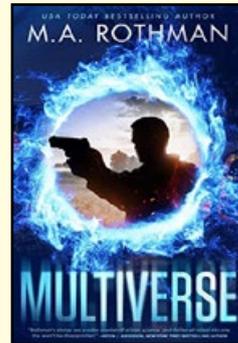


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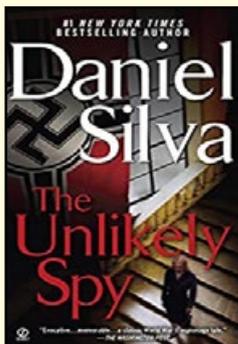
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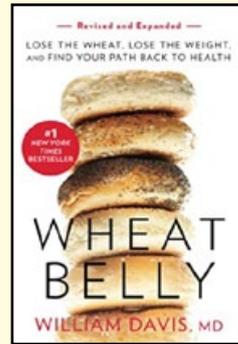
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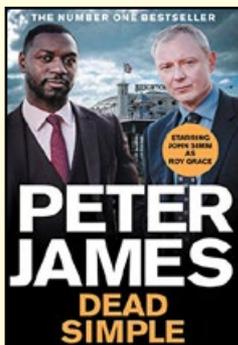
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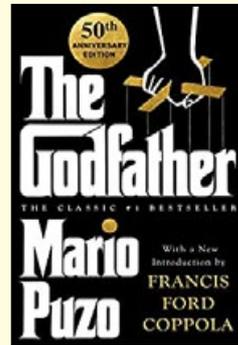
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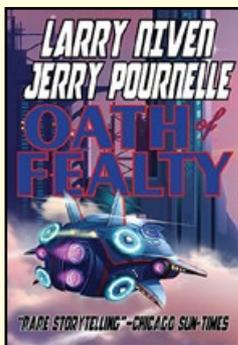
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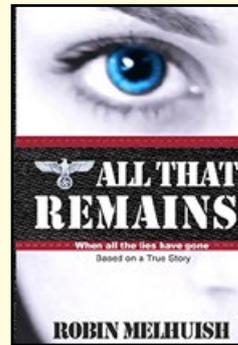
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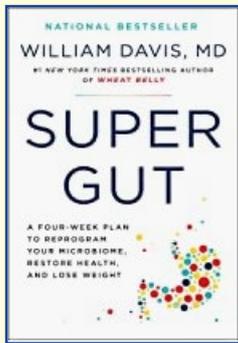


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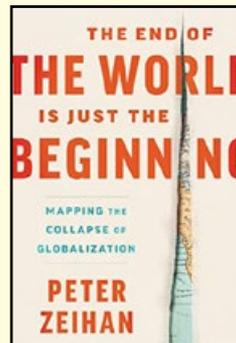
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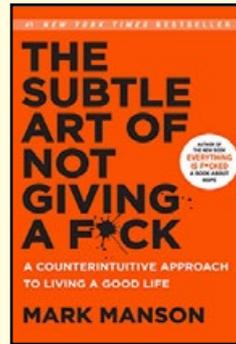
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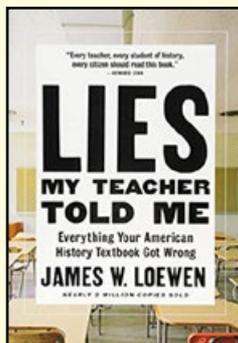
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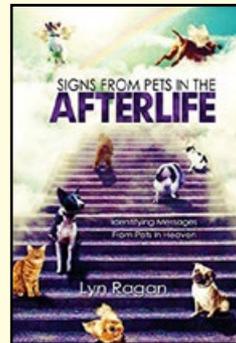
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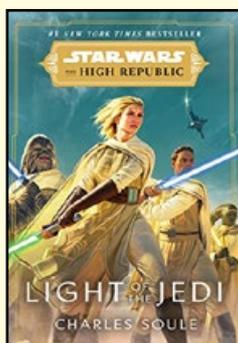
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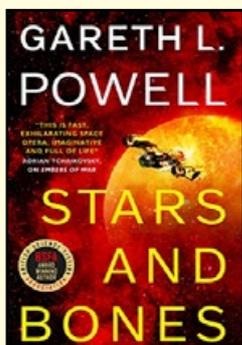
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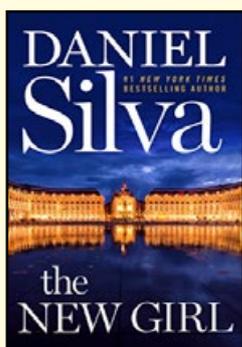
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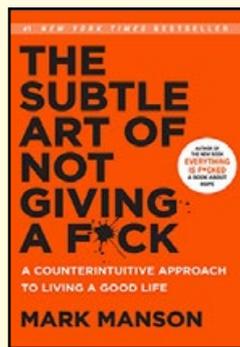
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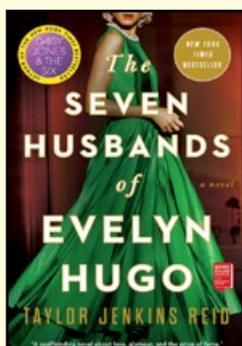
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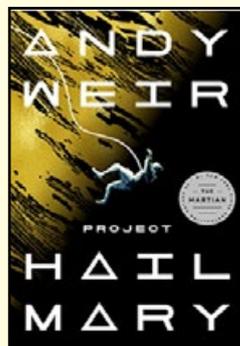
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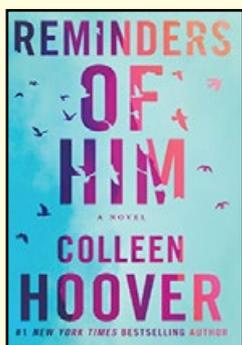
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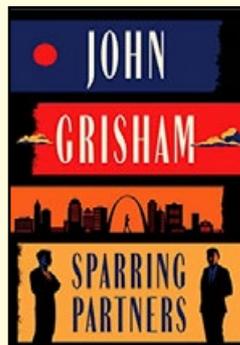
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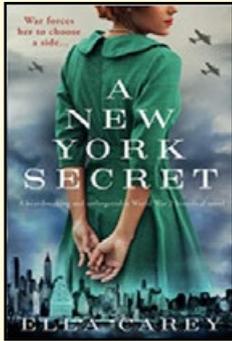


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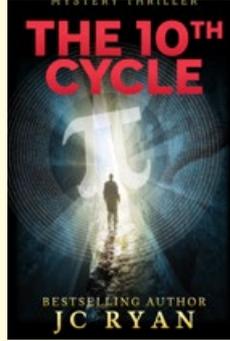
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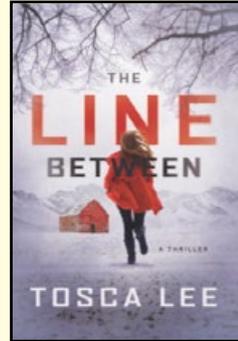
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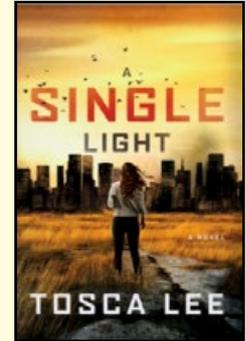
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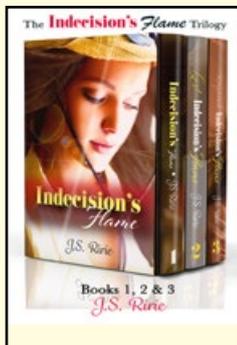
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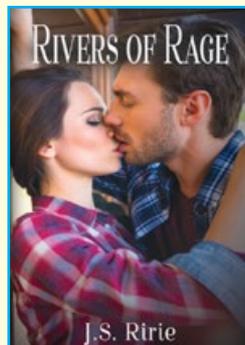
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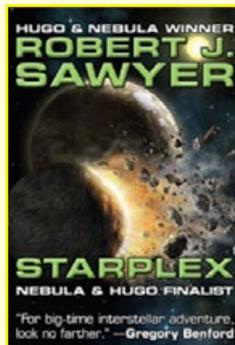
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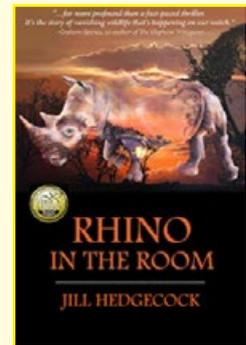
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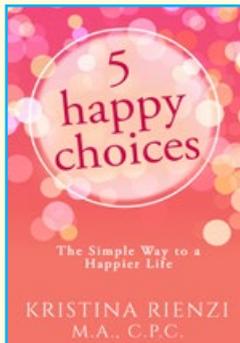
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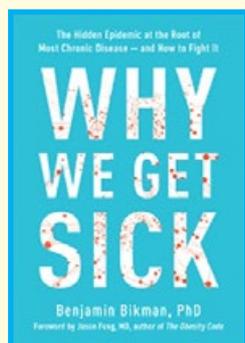
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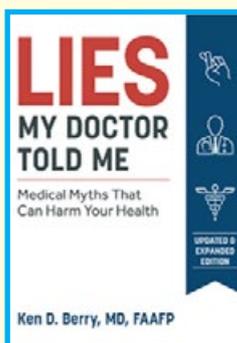
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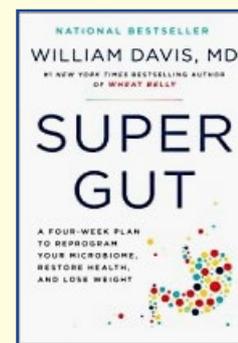
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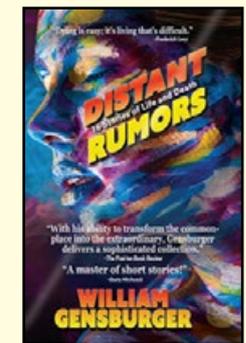
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