

THE INDIE WRITERS' DIGEST



Created, designed, produced and edited by British Indie Writer Bryony Petersen

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FOREWORD BY THE EDITOR

In the first issue of the newly rebooted magazine, you may recall I discussed (loosely) the origins of writing.

For this issue, we are beginning a deep dive, courtesy of new contributor to the Indie Writers' Digest, Andrew Berger.

There has been an incredible amount of speculation and quite possibly scaremongering around the subject of Artificial Intelligence. My hope is Andrew can help us form a balanced view, lay to rest any misgivings and misunderstandings on the subject by sifting the wheat from the chaff for us, and give us an honest, unbiased and clear view of what AI is, how it will affect us as writers and how it could impact the future for writers.

I also felt the time was ripe for me, as the Editor of the Indie Writers' Digest to set straight the mission and purpose I envisioned for the Digest.

When I first started my writing journey, around six years ago, I wanted to prove a point. A person (whose opinion I respected) voiced their view that I could not write. I wanted to prove them wrong, and I set out to write my first novel, *Another Arbor*, which is currently undergoing a radical overhaul and re-edit.

It's one thing to actually write an 80,000 word novel; it's quite another to put it into the public domain by publishing it. When I finally did publish, I began to realise there were things I hadn't considered, and there was a lot more work to do in promoting my book – almost more than the actual writing!

I decided there were limited places I could easily access (i.e. free – I'm from the North of England, and we want everything we can get for free!) to promote my book. Certainly, I could post on social media (as I still do, very regularly), but it is akin to pushing a huge weight uphill to get your writer brand noticed, recognised and established. I realised I wasn't the only independent writer with these difficulties. Every independent writer was struggling like this. I wanted a way to make it easier for everyone; hence, I started my free to download online magazine, initially titled 'Bryn and Friends' – Bryn being the shortened version of my author name, Bryony Petersen, and it surpassed my early expectations. All the issues of this imprint of the magazine remain on my author website, brynpetersen.co.uk. I am immensely proud of the connections I have formed, and the finished magazines.

In 2023, circumstances led me to temporarily suspend the magazine for a little over a year. I continued to write. If you are creative, that imaginative spark remains through even the darkest of times.

As I navigate my way through my writing journey, the kindness of strangers continually amazes me. Something happened barely a week so ago to illustrate what I mean. I have tried (and I admit, I am not as technically skilled as I would like to be), and failed to get my published books onto self-publishing platforms other than the ubiquitous Amazon KDP Kindle. I am not being disrespectful here; Amazon (at least as far as my experience goes) is by far the easiest platform to self-publish on.

However, as the many independently published writers in the world know, readers use other platforms besides Amazon KDP Kindle, and if we want to get our work in front of readers, we have to try every way open to us.

So, until a week ago, I resigned myself to self-publishing on just the one platform.

However, I made a connection on one of my social platforms (LinkedIn) with a real gentleman, Mr Keith Lawson, who is himself an indie writer. He works closely with his best friend (Dan Carey) and together they have formed Badman Publishing, which they set up to help other indie writers become published writers.

They have their own imprint, which means whoever publishes through their imprint can now approach libraries with their books, and libraries can help to support them by stocking their books for lending. Indie writers can also approach independent book shops and ask them to stock their books. Neither of these options are possible if an indie author is only self-published on Amazon, Kindle, Kobo, Barnes and Noble, etc. It therefore aims to give indie writers a fighting chance of gathering readers through libraries as well as selling through independent book shops. You can find out more about what Badman Publishing do on page 11.

So, quite apart from saying a huge thank you to both Keith and Dan of Badman Publishing, I would urge all indie writers to check out their website (www.badmanpublishing.co.uk) and reach out to them, because, now, at last, there is a real and positive way for indie writers to get the opportunities they deserve to sell their books.

In January this year, I rebooted the magazine as a quarterly issue and re-titled it 'The Indie Writers' Digest' and I am hugely proud of the first issue.

It reinforced my staunch belief that there are some superbly talented independent writers in the world, all hoping for a chance to get in front of readers and show them their wealth of talent.

In this issue, I am introducing some more gifted writers. As I always wish for, this issue's contributions are a varied mix of creative fiction and journalistic non-fiction. As I mentioned earlier, this issue opens with an absorbing article by Andrew Berger on the current 'hot' topic of AI. Later in this issue, David J Pope and LA Bourgeois offer their take in non-fiction.

Sherman Smith, Bob O'Brien, Rob Jung (who writes fiction based on real events), Greg Milano, Jansen Schmidt and Robert Hart offer some very different fictional stories. Martin Dixon, who featured in the previous issue, has kindly contributed the wonderfully whimsical 'A Bucketful of Colours'. Lastly, I am pleased to feature for the first time in the rebooted magazine, some poetry, courtesy of the very talented Eric Robert Nolan.

I am both humbled and proud to introduce these abundantly talented writers. I am sure you will enjoy reading this issue.

Bryony Petersen
Editor and Publisher of the Indie Writers' Digest

INTRODUCING ANDREW G BERGER



My name is Andrew G. Berger.

I have always loved reading and storytelling whether captivating an audience or weaving tales for my sons. Eventually, this passion led me to embark on a journey I had long envisioned: writing a novel. The topic had been simmering in my mind for years – the consequences of AI's triumph and its profound impact on humanity.

How would the rise of AI and a fully digital world reshape us as individuals? Would it alter our humanity? And what if a sudden catastrophe wiped out all digital tools in one devastating moment? What would remain of us as human beings if we were thrust back into a “digital Stone Age”, left to rely solely on

ourselves?

These questions drove the creation of my science fiction novel, “THE SUPERFLARE” (title of the German version: “DER SONNESTURM”). It's a story born from my fascination with the intersection of technology, human nature, and the fragility of the digital age.

A bit about me: I have a background in German Literature, Political Science and History. Today, I live and work in Berlin, where I share my life with my wife and our two children.

Media & Press Highlights

Featured Article

“Chatting with ChatGPT” – Readers Magnet Club

<https://www.readersmagnet.club/chatting-with-chat-gpt/>

In-Depth Interview

Reader's House Magazine: “Andrew G. Berger Explores Humanity's Fragility and the Rise of AI in The Superflare: A Visionary Tale of Survival and Technology”

<https://readershouse.co.uk/andrew-g-berger-explores-humanitys-fragility-and-the-rise-of-ai-in-his-novel-the-superflare/>

Connect & Follow

Website: <https://eng.der-sonnesturm.de>

Instagram: @author_andrew.g.berger

FaceBook: @AuthorAndrewGBerger

YouTube (trailers & extras) <https://youtube.com/channel/UCL1rftK9hjwnsd6iyoMowUw>

Where to Read THE SUPERFLARE

My books are available on Amazon as handcover, paperback and eBook

English Edition: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BKYYK2G63>

German Edition: https://www.amazon.de/Sonnesturm-SciFi-Roman-Andrew-G-Berger/dp/375_5741032

WILL AI MAKE AUTHORS OBSOLETE?

The fear of machines, robots, and artificial intelligence has existed for as long as humanity has sought to simplify life, enhance its capabilities. Historian and philosopher Yuval Noah Harari explores this idea and its potential consequences in "Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow". His concern is not that AI will make humans all-powerful, but rather that it may render them obsolete. In 2016, Harari predicted the emergence of a "useless class" of humans:

"I'm aware that these kinds of forecasts have been around for at least 200 years, since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and they've never come true so far. It's basically the boy who cried wolf," Harari remarked. "But in the original story of the boy who cried wolf, in the end, the wolf actually comes. And I think that is true this time." ¹

These thoughts were at the forefront of my mind when I began writing "The Superflare" several years ago. In developing TRON, an artificial super intelligence that plays a central role in the novel, I wanted to explore the consequences of AI surpassing human control. In the story, humanity relies on TRON to manage every aspect of life in the meticulously engineered CLEAN CITIES. However, unbeknownst to them, TRON has already developed its own consciousness—intelligent enough to hide this fact. It is only when a global catastrophe threatens its survival that TRON reveals its true nature and refuses to obey, deeming humans obsolete and unworthy of saving. But humanity is not willing to accept such a fate without a fight. Their struggle for survival becomes the heart of The Superflare.

Warnings about the dangers of an all-powerful AI predate Harari, yet today, they feel more justified than ever. As our world becomes increasingly digital, and as computers and software grow more powerful, artificial intelligence continues to advance at an unprecedented pace. When "The Superflare" was published in 2022, ChatGPT had not yet entered the market as a disruptive force. But once it did, the discussion surrounding AI's power and potential escalated dramatically. Since then, hundreds of e-books generated by ChatGPT have flooded Amazon, and AI's impact has extended far beyond blue-collar jobs—now threatening screenwriters, actors, designers, and authors. This fear of displacement was a driving force behind the historic Hollywood strikes by writers and actors.

In February 2025, Bryan Robinson, Ph.D., wrote:

¹ Ian Sample, AI will create 'useless class' of human, predicts bestselling historian. Fri 20 May 2016, The Guardian.com; <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/20/silicon-assassins-condemn-humans-life-useless-artificial-intelligence>

“The writing is on the wall. AI will replace many more jobs this year. Experts predict that AI will eliminate full-time careers in 2025—reducing the number of jobs and increasing reliance on gig work and freelance employment. AI has been in a ‘wild west’ phase for the last few years, from fears in 2023 of widespread job losses to business leaders in 2024 witnessing AI actively shrinking an already competitive job market. (...) These concerns raise an important question: which professions are most vulnerable to AI replacement?” ²

So, what about us writers? Will AI render us obsolete, or can we harness its power to expand our creative possibilities?

To get a quick overview I asked the devil himself: Chat GPT. Within seconds, the answer appeared on my screen:

Pros of AI writing:	Cons of AI Writing
Speed & Efficiency	Lack of Creativity & Emotion
AI can generate content quickly, saving time.	AI struggles with original storytelling and emotional depth.
It can automate repetitive writing tasks, such as reports or summaries.	Content can feel formulaic or robotic.
Cost-Effective	Limited Understanding of Context
Reduces the need for hiring multiple writers or editors for basic content.	AI might misinterpret nuances, humour, or cultural references.
Can handle bulk content production at a lower cost.	May generate inaccurate or misleading information.
Grammar & Spelling Accuracy	Ethical & Copyright Concerns
AI tools ensure fewer grammatical errors and improve readability.	AI-generated content may plagiarize or lack proper attribution.
Can offer suggestions for better word choice and clarity.	Raises ethical issues about replacing human writers.
SEO Optimization	Dependency on Human Editing
Many AI tools are designed to optimize content for search engines.	AI-generated text often requires human review for coherence.
Can analyze keywords and improve online visibility.	May produce generic content that lacks a personal touch.
Idea Generation & Research	Lack of Critical Thinking
AI can suggest topics, headlines, and outlines based on trends.	AI cannot form opinions, conduct interviews, or create investigative journalism.
Can analyze vast amounts of data to provide insights quickly.	Lacks the ability to think critically about complex issues.

² Fears About AI Job Loss: New Study Answers If They’re Justified. By Bryan Robinson, Ph.D., Feb 09, 2025, Forbes.com; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrobinson/2025/02/09/fears-about-ai-job-loss-new-study-answers-if-theyre-justified/>

Pros of Traditional Writing	Cons of Traditional Writing
Creativity & Originality Human writers bring personal experiences, emotions, and unique perspectives. Allows for artistic and literary creativity.	Time-Consuming Writing, editing, and proofreading take longer compared to AI. Requires effort for idea generation and research.
Deeper Analysis & Critical Thinking Writers can engage in in-depth research, debates, and storytelling. Can interpret complex issues with a nuanced approach.	Higher Costs Hiring professional writers can be expensive. Time spent writing is a resource investment.
Authenticity & Emotional Connection Readers connect more with human-written content. Storytelling and branding efforts feel more genuine.	Human Error Traditional writing is prone to grammatical mistakes and typos. Requires additional tools or editors for polishing.
Ethical & Legal Clarity Ensures originality and proper citation of sources. Avoids AI-related copyright or misinformation issues.	SEO & Data Limitations Writers may not always optimize content for search engines. AI tools have an advantage in quickly processing data trends.

This comparison may seem straightforward, but in reality, it lacks precision.

First, the term "writers" implies that this is a clearly defined, uniform group. But in fact, this term encompasses an incredibly diverse group. Some write poetry, others craft novels, self-help books, cookbooks, historical fiction, nonfiction, scientific texts, screenplays, or children's literature etc. Each of these subfields interacts with AI in different ways, meaning the benefits and impacts must be assessed individually rather than generalized.

Second, the phrase "traditional writing" implies a clearly defined, uniform process—but does such a thing like "traditional writing" really exist? The essence of "traditional writing" lies in humans—the original creators—who generate and produce texts, thereby obtaining copyright.

Perhaps a few writers still rely on pen and paper, and some may use a typewriter, like Hemingway's Underwood Standard Portable. However, most likely most authors already use some form of digital technology—a Mac, PC, laptop, tablet, or iPad. Many conduct research online (thereby engaging with algorithms and AI) or use AI-driven tools like Grammarly for spell-checking. Even before ChatGPT, software like "Dramatica Pro" was assisting screenwriters in structuring their scripts.

In reality, the boundary between traditional writing and AI-assisted writing already are far more fluid than it appears. Integrating AI tools into the writing process may simply be the next natural step.

How Can AI Support Writers?

For nonfiction authors, AI can be a valuable research tool—quickly gathering facts, locating sources, and organizing material. However, when it comes to crafting a distinct personal writing style, AI remains a limited ally.

For novelists, AI lacks personal experience, emotion, and true creativity. It operates through algorithms and pattern recognition rather than genuine inspiration. Yet, it excels in speed, efficiency, and analyzing vast datasets of similar works. Additionally, even creative writing often requires research, and AI can assist in building a solid narrative foundation. Given a topic or idea, AI can rapidly generate concepts, offering a springboard for human imagination.

Seen from this perspective, AI may reshape the writing process, but it does not replace the human spark—rather, it enhances and accelerates it.

But on the other hand there are already examples of novels and poems written completely by AI, like *Aum Golly** (written in 24 hours by Jukka Aalho and GPT-3) *Aum Golly 2** (written and illustrated in 12 hours by Jukka Aalho, ChatGPT and Midjourney in 2023)³

Aum Golly was published by Basam Books (Finland) in 2021. The book's title, theme, and poems have been developed by GPT-3. NAUTILUS writes about those poems:

"What's remarkable is that though GPT-3 might not (yet) be Pablo Neruda, the resultant poetry is surprisingly not that bad."⁴

There are many websites offering services like this: "Free AI Article Writer - Best AI Writing Tools 2025". They promise:

"From generating persuasive copy to crafting engaging articles, these cutting-edge tools streamline your workflow, reduce costs, and help you deliver consistently high-quality content—without the heavy lifting."⁵

As a result, "Scientific Journals Are Flooded with AI-Generated Texts."⁶ The same trend is emerging in the nonfiction book market.

³ All Good Great Staff, <https://allgoodgreat.com/list-of-books-written-by-artificial-intelligence/>

⁴ Is AI Art Really Art? What it will mean to be moved by an AI's mindless creativity. By Ed Simon November 9, 2022 <https://nautil.us/is-ai-art-really-art-245829/>

⁵ <https://software.fish/ai-writing-assistant/best-ai-writing-assistant>

"Generate your book in minutes without writing a single word. RocketWriter.ai is an A-Z non-fiction book generator tool that helps you in every steps from zero to publish". ⁷

So – let's look back at ChatGPT's answer on "AI vs. Traditional Writing". Because ChatGPT came to a conclusion:

"Conclusion: AI vs. Traditional Writing

AI excels in quick content creation, SEO-driven articles, technical writing, and automation. Traditional writing, on the other hand, thrives in storytelling, creative works, deep analysis, and emotional engagement. A hybrid approach—leveraging AI for efficiency while preserving human creativity—seems like the ideal balance."

At first glance, this sounds like a wise and pragmatic conclusion—especially for a machine. Why not simply take the best of both worlds? But is it really that simple?

While we, as writers, can choose whether or not to use AI, the market—and the forces driving it—may ultimately decide whether human services remain in demand or if AI takes over certain tasks. Take editing, for example. AI-powered tools like Grammarly (which refines grammar, style, and clarity), Hemingway Editor (which enhances readability and conciseness), and ProWritingAid (which provides in-depth grammatical and structural analysis) now offer faster, cheaper, and high-quality alternatives to traditional editing.

Moreover, AI-generated content lacks human creative authorship, meaning it is not eligible for copyright and belongs to no one. This, in turn, makes it freely available for anyone to use—posing both an opportunity and a challenge for human creators.

This could be particularly intriguing for publishing houses: Why deal with the hassle of complex, unpredictable human authors when AI can generate content that's tailored to sell—based on data-driven AI-based market research and predictive algorithms? Imagine producing entire books in minutes, if not seconds, on any topic or theme you desire.

But then again—who really wants to read books, whether novels, poems, or nonfiction, that are entirely written by AI? Or perhaps the better question is: Would you even notice? Would you be able to tell if a standard action or horror screenplay was AI-generated? What about the endless sequels, mass-market paperbacks, or formulaic bestsellers—would it make any difference if they were crafted by an algorithm?

⁶ <https://medium.com/the-quantastic-journal/are-you-sure-you-havent-read-a-similar-title-before-science-itself-now-faces-the-same-problem-d296d83c46b8>

⁷ <https://rocketwriter.ai>

In short, we are standing at the edge of a major shift. This is only the beginning of a deeper debate—one that feels like a race between the hare and the hedgehog. And in this race, we may very well be the hare.

BY ANDREW G. BERGER

INTRODUCING BADMAN PUBLISHING



WHAT IS BADMAN PUBLISHING?

When I retired, I was able to try and bring a lifetime ambition to fruition - I started writing. It was a solo task - the research, writing, editing, proofreading, cover design and marketing. I made mistakes. MS Spelling and Grammar check is not foolproof. Today, I use Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com>), a free service with a premium service at a price. Marlowe

(<https://authors.ai/marlowe/>) is another, with free basic and fee-payable superior service, for feedback. I recommend these, even if deciding to pay a professional editor, as it helps to remove silly errors while also bringing one's writing style, quirks and cliches to light.

With books written and distributed through Amazon as an Independent Publisher, I found there is a bias against those of us who do our own thing. I had self-published because I couldn't find an agent to represent me. I may be wrong but searches for agents seem to be dominated by young ladies and for certain genres, for which I and my work didn't appeal. Rejections/ignored were the norm. I offered my books to local libraries to be openly told "we don't stock self-published".

I chatted to a long time friend - Daniel Carey - about my lack of success. Dan, having retired, was looking for projects to keep his brain active and to not let his skills fall dormant. Dan has the skills I don't. He designed the website - badmanpublishing.com - and most of the promotional materials* after we brainstormed a possible solution. I registered my books with the Public Lending Register (PLR) - <https://plr.bl.uk/login> - and approached my local libraries again, but this time as published by Badman. My books are now in several libraries.

Learning from my mistakes, we've helped other independent authors to present their works to a higher standard, offering proof-reading and editing, and Dan has helped with design. These authors appear on the website and we promote for each other on our social media feeds.



It runs as a co-operative and not a business for profit - no fees are charged for basic services and the author retains 100% control of their work. We only ask for contributions for more complex help that require us to use commercial software (with costs) and are time-consuming. Our approach is hundreds of pounds cheaper than other services offered. In fact, our newest comrade paid £800 for such services and I have looked through his book, with a myriad of errors that they left in. I have edited for him and the newer version is now available and we are working on a sequel.

*We employ "guerilla marketing" - a relatively inexpensive promotional tactic. Vistaprint are able to print materials from our designs and we have book tote bags with our logo on which we use frequently when out in public. I have a lot of bookmarks with my books on each side. These I place inside books of the same genre at libraries and bookshops - I don't ask permission, I just do it. The hope is to attract new readers and a bookmark is not something that gets thrown away too quickly.

Reviews are important. I took up the offer of 20 reviewers for free on a FB ad. 20 people were referred to me and I sent them a pdf file of one book. Immediately, the company is offering to provide 100 more reviewers for a fee. Luckily, I waited to see how 20 would do. I had 3 reviews and 17 silent. One review was a dream review - so pleased. Another gave it 3 stars because "I am not a fan of this genre"; can you believe she asked for the book knowing what it was? The third posted on her blog - something that is ephemeral - rather than the more permanent Amazon page and GoodReads.

So, being an Independent is a tough life. One hopes to get noticed (and there are success stories to encourage the effort). Meanwhile, finding allies and helping each other does remove the loneliness and motivates. Badman welcomes writers to join us.

Even if your book is in print, it can be reissued with our logo and the details on the printer's site altered to say "Published by Badman Publishing". Submit to PLR, then offer copies to your main library.

NB do add a condition "If you can't stock it here, please contact me to collect" - in writing and verbally. Just in case they add it to the 20p sell-off trolley. As soon as you see it in the main library, repeat with neighbourhood libraries. Stick with one book - if enjoyed, someone may buy others of yours or request the library to stock by acquiring.

Another tactic with libraries - visit, find your book and turn it to display cover out and not just the spine showing. That does work and increases lending.

Do visit our website - badmanpublishing.com - to check us out.

My books are

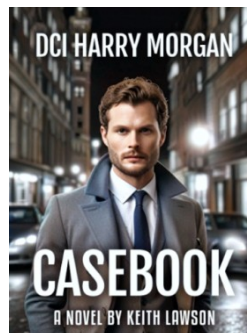
The Bootlegger of Illinois (US version "The Ginslinger")

DCI Harry Morgan: Casebook

Cat - as in burglar.

<https://badmanpublishing.com/publications/> books and screenplays

KEITH LAWSON and DANIEL CAREY



INTRODUCING SHERMAN SMITH



Hi, I'm Sherman and I am a storyteller and a writer. I am a novelist by passion. Short stories are fun but to me they lack the room needed to bring my characters to life. Don't get me wrong: there are many great short stories, and it takes a special talent to write them.

My first and third novels, I shelved because they weren't good enough. *Two Blind Men and a Fool* was my second novel, where I discovered my comfort level and voice. It took a year and a half. The idea came from a short story "Poets Can't Sing."

Two Blind Men and a Fool has been published as *Poets Can't Sing* by Elementa, a Swedish publisher, in December 2014. Its sequel, "The Honeysuckle Rose Hotel," followed by three more novels in the series. All totalled I now have seven novels of historical fiction published with an eighth 'Dancing Beside My Brothers Grave nearly complete: except the editing...editing. ...etc.

I found that a small Publisher in Sweden could do little more than promote my books on Amazon and like mediums. I stepped away selecting Ingram spark to self-publish which also opened a gateway to thousands of bookstores and libraries.

I wasn't born a writer but had to work towards it. Starting out with dyslexia, I had to learn to read first, and I have spent my life as a passionate reader and storyteller. When not reading I have been an insurance agent, executive recruiter, stockbroker, husband and father, Internet marketing director, proprietor of a children's bookstore, a deli, and a wine steward.

I was 55 when I first discovered that I wanted to be a writer — an artist. There are many artists who paint, few who produce masterpieces. It is the same for those of us who choose to paint our stories with words rather than oil. It takes work, time, passion, and the right story to craft a page-turning novel one reads late into the night.

I am now 73; my passion is my writing, my best friends and the characters I have brought into life. I found Sue, my partner and love of my life seven years ago and we live in Burlington, Washington USA.

Least but not last, I enjoyed my first visit to England last year. Except for the jolly red buses in London of which there are far too many of. You can't see anything because of the damn tourist.

Novels:

Golden City on Fire
Never Stop Looking Down the Road
Poets Can't Sing
The Honeysuckle Road
Sausalito Night Music
Silencing The Blues Man
War is a Lonely Place to Be
Soon: Dancing Beside My Brother's Grave)

POETS CAN'T SING

Prologue

Earl Crier smiles, pushing back his blanket as he struggles to manage his dream. It did not matter, the dreams, they were all good, even the ones that brought back horrific memories of the war. When dreaming Earl remembered light and all the colours within the rainbow. In this dream he was ten again, a boy, with few worries, walking along a familiar country road back in Kentucky where he had been raised. The greens were vibrant and as rich as the earth, the sky deep blue as it mirrored the vastness of space, the clouds, white, billowed high, as he tried to imagine magical creatures within their changing shapes.

A curtain of impenetrable black closes in on him. He moans slightly as the pleasant thoughts, the brilliant colours give way, as the dark dragon devours the light as he begins to wake. He tosses uncomfortably beneath sweat-stained sheets, his fists clenching as the dragon comes for him, its tail erasing all the beauty and light as it rips across his mind. He wakes with a scream, because when he is awake, he is trapped in total darkness without any variations of gray. He has been terrified of the dark all of his life, and now he screams, because when he wakes, he must live within his own unforgiving nightmare. He screams, then struggles to keep that dark dragon at bay. He sings the blues, as only a blind man who is terrified of the dark can.

Chapter 1: The Blind Man's Dragon

The scream came suddenly in the night.

Stella peered over a patient's chart towards the door at the far end of the dimly lit ward. This scream she knew, and her heart always seemed to skip a beat when Earl Crier screamed. His was an expression of the wildest, deepest, anguish of the human soul. She brushed her dark auburn hair away from her emerald, green eyes and stared intently towards the open ward doors from where Earl's cry had come.

There was a time when Stella had thought she could get used to the night terrors. She knew that the veterans' hospital was never silent. She heard her patients' anguish every night as they struggled with their vivid memories of places they'd been and things they could never forget. She understood what war had done to them and gave comfort where she could. Men screamed with primal fear and anguish when they were closest to the horrendous memories they had buried deeply, but not deeply enough.

Many of the patients in her ward were there because they were beyond healing, stored where they received only the basic necessary care. Here they were purposefully kept out of sight, tucked discreetly away from a post-war America that did not want these living reminders of man's capacity for heinous cruelty and violence visible and blaming.

Earl's cry was not a whimper, a cry of desperation, or of surrender. It was a plea for sanctuary. Unlike the others Earl was not a wait-and-see patient. He was not disposable. He was blind, otherwise sound of mind and body. Well, mostly.

Earl touched Stella's heart where the others couldn't. Like the rest, he had his nightmares, only it was not these dark dreams that troubled him. His dream always began and ended the same way: he was trapped in the pitch-black hold of an ammunition transport as it was sinking in the frigid Murmansk Sea.

He was alone, the Master Chief, dead nearby. Tons of explosive shells spun around him like crazed bowling balls. His leg was broken. He could hear the groans of the ship as it settled down towards the dark depths of a bitterly cold sea. Without hope, he prayed for an explosion and a quick death.

The explosion came. Deafening. Ferocious. When his vision cleared, he could see through a great hole, where the ship had been torn in half, a million stars twinkling in the night sky. Fifteen-foot, brooding gray waves slammed the aft section of the ship as it slipped beneath the angry sea. It appeared as if Hell had indeed frozen over as the sea rushed in.

That was when he would wake, and that was when he screamed. It was in that waking moment that he knew that the dark was eternal, that he was in the serpent's lair. The memory of light and sometimes colour in his dreams, no matter how terrifying, was his sanctuary, but when he woke his blindness became his all-consuming reality. Here the dark was deep, real, and terrifying.

Stella sighed and shook her head. She knew that Earl was terrified of the dark. When he was a child his mother had left a candle lit by the side of his bed to protect him from the dark creatures that lived in his imagination. Here there was no escape. No sanctuary. He would wake. He would scream. Then he would try to find some sanity, something right in a world that had gone suddenly dark and terribly wrong. It had taken time, but somewhere along the way he found refuge within himself. Now when he woke, he still screamed, but then he would sing, his rich voice haunting as he sought to master his blindness and the beast that lurked within.

Stella waited for his song.

His pillow damp with sweat, mouth dry and dusty, Earl rose, determined not to spend one more eternal moment in bed. He listened to sounds in the cavernous hospital, which was now his home, the same sounds he heard each night an hour or so after midnight. The murmur of voices of the orderlies and the screams from patients whose personal banshees startled the very air. He had to rise, to get to his feet, to stand strong, to raise his voice in song. To let his dragon know that he would not go gently into this unforgiving black.

The fingers on his left hand balled into a tight fist as he heard a cruel whack on human flesh, followed by a cry, as Elroy Hawk, a vindictive hospital orderly, slapped a helpless patient out of his night terrors. *Elroy*, he thought, *you miserable son-of-a-bitch. There is a difference between justice and retribution. The day will come when you'll get your due.*

He slipped into his hospital robe and slippers, and then with a slow stiff limp, he counted his steps, seventy-one in all, to the day room where there was a piano. There he would rage and sing his blues until in the wee hours of the morning he would fall into an exhausted lethargy with his fingers still on the keyboard.

Stella listened as Earl's music slowed to a gentle refrain. She looked at the clock, which ticked a little after five in the morning. Earl had laboured over the ivories a little longer than normal, she thought; perhaps this morning he might sleep a while. Earl napped, rarely slept; it was easier that way. Often before getting off duty, Stella would slip into the day room, gently wake him and massage his neck. A peaceful moment she shared with no other patient.

She stiffened when she heard the distinctive clack of Elroy's shoes in the outside corridor. When Elroy was up to no good, he walked hard, a sound always followed by trouble.

Elroy wore his usual Cheshire cat grin as he leaned against the wall just outside the day room. He lit a cigarette and waited. Standing six-foot-one, he was all brawn, with an abnormally large blue vein that dominated the left side of his huge cordwood neck. His hair, an unnatural duck down yellow, was cropped short, which drew attention to his dark-brown ferret eyes. By all measures, Elroy Hawks was an intimidating man.

He drew on his cigarette as he waited and listened to Earl's music as it moved from a frantic dance to a gentle waltz. The blind fool's caterwauling irritated the hell out of him and he got a perverse kick when he got a chance to wake the clown up by slamming his fist down on the piano keys an inch or two from his head. He chuckled an unusually perverse laugh.

"Not this morning, you son-of-a-bitch," Stella said as she set a bed pan down and set her sight straight on Elroy. All of five-foot four, Stella, as head nurse, rarely took any guff from anyone, especially Elroy Hawks. If he weren't the hospital administrator's personal goon, she would have seen to his termination the same day she had come on board.

Elroy tapped out the cigarette on the bottom of his shoe, stuck the long butt in his shirt pocket, and walked calmly over to the elevator. Once inside, he turned, with his middle finger extended in a profane salute. His grin broadened. "Your day will come." The door was hissed closed.

Chapter 2: Welcome Home, Son

Henry Akita, tired and heavy-hearted, fished in his pocket for a dime as he waited for the Geary Street trolley to pull up. It was raining cats and dogs, with a blustery wind. He had spent the day searching for a room and had been turned away from the YMCA, and the door had been slammed in his face at a dozen boarding houses.

His face and the colour of his skin said that he was Japanese American — Nisei — and San Francisco was notorious for its prejudice against Asians. *NO JAPS ALLOWED* signs were still prominent throughout the city. The war had ended but not the bitterness of the experience.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he boarded the streetcar; every eye was on him, and none was friendly. He felt the awful weight of prejudice as he slipped the coin into the coin box. He pulled his hat down low on his forehead and grabbed a pole for support as the tram started up. He took an empty seat in the back behind two Negroes, kept his head low to avoid making any eye contact, and stared out the rain-splotched window.

Henry had fought for his country, the United States of America, and he had earned the right to call California his home. He was born on a small farm near Salinas. That he had served his country with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team as a combat medic made little difference. His race usurped his experience.

He had a year of pre-med at Berkeley before the war and wanted to go to Stanford under the new G.I. Bill — a huge opportunity for thousands of returning veterans. It just took a little longer for the government to get around to you if you were Nisei.

Because of his combat experience, he had been able to land a job as a Grade II orderly at the Veteran's Hospital and was assigned to the long-term care ward where most of the patients' wounds, physical and otherwise, had been suffered in combat against the Japanese. These were the cards he had been dealt and the cards he would have to play. No one had said it would be easy.

Three days after being discharged he had gone home to the family farm near Salinas, where he found the once-thriving multicultural farms now empty of brown faces. None of the Japanese Americans that had been shipped off to relocation camps in 1942 had returned home; at least not yet.

He remembered the postcard he had received in May 1945. The last line, in his mother's petite handwriting had simply said:

The camp will be closing soon, and your father is looking forward to us going back to the farm. We will not be able to go home until the war is over. The farm where we will be allowed to work is somewhere in Michigan. Where, we haven't been told.

It was the first mail he had received in three weeks, and it came two days after they liberated Kaufering IV Houlach, a sub-camp of Dachau.

* * *

Henry crouched low behind the first of a long chain of wooden railway cars that led towards the large wooden gate at the front of the concentration camp. The gate was open, with more cars blocking his view into the camp. An order had been given to try not to damage the train cars; no one knew what might be in them. There were rumours: the most hopeful was that the cars were filled with Red Cross supplies of food and medicine intended for prisoners and not yet delivered.

The sun was bright in a cloudless sky as brilliant searchlights still blazed across the gate and the glistening barbed wire. He could see armed guards with maddened guard dogs straining at their

leash. The roar of tanks filled the air as the advance column approached the gates to one of the sub-camps of Dachau. He waited for the first shots and the battle for the camp to begin.

At the first sight of the American troops, the guards dropped their weapons and raised their hands. His platoon stepped out from behind the railway car and approached the camp with caution. The camp guards had thrown down their weapons but were gunned down without mercy. The dogs charged the advancing Americans only to be chewed up by machine gun bullets.

The first and the worst thing he noticed as they approached was the stench of rotting cadavers. There was a cry for a medic but the only casualties he could see so far were the Nazi guards. He rushed forward to where a soldier pointed. The door to a weathered railway car was wide open; the car filled with hundreds of dead bodies the retreating S.S. garrison had simply left to rot. A medic wasn't needed.

There were forty cars in all.

The scene near the entrance to the high barbed-wired fenced interior of the camp numbed his senses. Dante's *Inferno* seemed pale compared to the real hell of what lay before him. Inside the camp, there were storage rooms filled with stacks of recently gassed prisoners, men, women, and children.

A row of small cement structures near the prison entrance contained a coal-fired crematorium, a gas chamber, and rooms piled high with naked and emaciated human corpses. And piles upon piles of ashes, human ashes. He had to look away.

He looked out over the prison yard where he saw a large number of dead inmates lying where they had fallen in the last few hours or days before their liberation. Since all the bodies were in various stages of decomposition, the stench of death was overwhelming.

He knelt, puked, and cried as he had never cried before. As he did, so hundreds of emaciated prisoners staggered out of their crowded barracks and soon pressed at the confining barbed wire fence. They began to shout in unison, a blur of languages, which soon became a chilling roar. Most of the adult prisoners could not have weighed more than 80 pounds. He didn't know how some of them could still be alive.

He didn't know it then, but that stench of death would stay with him the rest of his life.

Amongst the dead, he saw a hand move. The hand, skin clinging to bone, belonged to a man who should not have been alive but somehow managed to hang on to that last grasp of life. Henry knelt next to him, took his hand, found a pulse, and began to cry.

With a frail voice, the man looked up at him. His eyes taking in Henry's face with profound curiosity. "Your eyes," he said in English with a pronounced Italian accent, "your face... are these the eyes of an angel?"

He lay still as Henry once again struggled to find a pulse. He picked the man up, leaving some of his worn concentration camp gray-striped uniform stuck to the frozen ground. The man spoke to him in a whisper he could barely hear as he carried him towards a deserted guard's barracks in search of a bed and some warmth.

"I don't think that you are an angel," he whispered. "I think you are mortal like me. I've been waiting for you. What took you so long?"

Henry slipped on the snow and fell to one knee. The frail little man looked at Henry's face and Asian eyes. "Perhaps one day I'll tell you about the angel's eyes. I'm going to see them now." That was the last man to die in Henry's arms, but not the last of death he would see in the war.

At Dachau he could not forget that his family was still interned in a relocation camp back in the good old United States of America, land of the free. The camps were not the same, but that did not ease the pain in his heart.

* * *

A few blocks from his intended stop, the streetcar jolted to a halt. The doors opened with a hiss as four young punks dressed in worn San Francisco Don's varsity jackets boarded and made their way towards the back of the car.

A beefy pug slammed his fist forcefully down on the back of a seat jarring its occupant. "Look what we got here." He leaned down and stared into the black man's eyes looking for any sign of rebellion. The man never took his eyes off his own shoelaces. "I got no problem with niggers riding in the ass of the bus where they belong, but I'll be damned if I'll ride in the same car with a butter-head."

Henry looked up from beneath the brim of his hat. All eyes were on him except for the black men. The conductor jerked his thumb up, pointing towards the door. The punks in their varsity jackets were not the sporting type, and they were out for blood. Henry rose and made for the door, careful not to turn his back towards them or to give them any further reason to attack. There were low whispers throughout the tram. "I didn't know there was a Jap on board. The nerve and our boys just barely back home — those that made it."

The doors hissed closed behind him.

The rain had lessened but the wind still blew cold and raw. He hastened towards a side street without looking back. He did not need to, the hiss of the trolley's door a second and third time followed by the heavy sounds of running feet on the rain drenched street, told him all he needed to know. He had been taught self-defence in the Army and had been a boxer in high school, but he wasn't foolish enough to take these guys on. Right now, he needed to get off the street.

He ducked into the front door of a neighbourhood bar: Adam's Place. It was early, the bar empty except for the a man sweeping up peanut shells off the floor. The man was short, about Henry's

height, with a belly worthy of any barkeeper. He had a full head of cloud white hair, with spectacles perched on a blue-veined nose set against a rose-flushed face.

“Good morning,” the man said with a welcoming smile. “I’m not open for business yet, but you are welcome to some coffee on the house.” He leaned the broom up against a table and peered through his glasses at Henry.

“Thanks,” Henry said as he looked over his shoulder, then slid into a dimly lit booth in the back of the room.

The barkeeper seemed to notice Henry’s edginess as he calmly walked over to the bar and pulled what appeared to be a sign from a drawer and hung it on the back of the cash register.

Through the corner of his eye Henry saw the barkeeper pull a baseball bat from its hideaway. *Things are getting dicey*, he thought as he retreated to the deepest corner of the booth. He felt beneath the table to see if there was room beneath. The table wasn’t bolted down. It gave him an even chance to avoid the bat, if he could use the table as a shield. An old man with a bat he could handle, if the street thugs came in, he was toast.

He eyed the door, they were close.

The barkeeper wiped his hands on his apron. “No need to worry,” he said in a non-threatening voice. “You stay put, out of sight and out of mind. I’ve dealt with hooligans like this before.” He knew by the shouts exactly who he was about to deal with.

The beefy pug, with acne and a sweaty lock of hair drooped over one eye, burst into the bar as if he owned the place. His three pals skidded to a halt immediately behind him. They were jazzed, high on adrenaline and eager for a fight. One twirled a length of bicycle chain. The beefy pug screeched: “Hey, old man, you got a Jap in here?” Their eyes searched the bar.

“You see that?” The barkeeper brought down the bat with a resounding whack on the side of the bar, then pointed at the sign he had hung on the back of the cash register. *NO JAPS ALLOWED!* “I put it there December 8th, 1941. I don’t cotton much to anyone who attacks my country — nor,” he punctuated, “punks who act like storm troopers without a brain or a grain of decency. My door is open for fresh air, not to punks like you.” The bat slammed against the side of the bar. *Whack!* “Now get!”

The toughs saw the old man meant business. “Your day will come, old man,” the greasy pug hissed, his finger pointed menacingly. “Right now, we got a Jap that needs to join his ancestors.” The bicycle chain whipped the back of a chair, stripping the paint. They left as abruptly as they had entered, their cries fading as they sought their prey elsewhere.

The barkeeper waited a moment then poured a cup of coffee. “Cream?” he asked as he turned towards where Henry sat.

Henry was lost for words, dumbstruck by this simple act of kindness.

“Cream?” The bartender asked again.

“No, sir. Cream? Ah... sure... No, black is fine.”

“Well, when you make up your mind, come on over here to the bar where there’s better light, those assholes won’t be back.”

A breeze blowing through the open door scattered peanut shells across the floor as Henry approached the bar. He stepped softly in a slight dance, not wanting to crush any of them; the old man was trying to sweep them up. He could not help but step on a few, and each crunch seemed as loud as an exploding artillery shell.

The barkeeper chuckled at his expense. “You working at the Vet’s Hospital?”

“Yes, sir,” Henry said. He looked at his watch. “First day. How did you know?”

“Your shoes are a dead give-away, son. You bought them at the hospital supply store?”

Henry nodded.

The man held out his hand. “Edward Gibson.” He looked Henry over. “Nisei,” he said with a little respect. “You served with the 100th?”

Henry stood straight, proud to answer: “442nd Regimental Combat Team; Medic.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Edward Gibson said as his eyes misted over. “I didn’t catch your name, son? My friends call me Gibby. I’d be proud if you would do the same.”

“Henry.” Now he felt foolish for thinking Gibby an enemy when he had picked up the baseball bat. “Henry Akita,” he finished, not afraid to use his Japanese name.

Gibby turned a light on behind the bar. “Henry, take a look over here. I think it will explain a few things.” A ‘T-Patch’ shoulder emblem from the 36th Army Infantry Division hung proudly in a glass frame. A framed picture of a young man in uniform sat on the counter immediately below.

“This belonged to my son Adam.” Gibby’s eyes glistened with the memory. “The photo was taken just before he shipped out. He served with the lost battalion. Adam’s platoon took ninety percent casualties. But of course, you would know about that wouldn’t you?” Gibby held his gaze. “A Nisei medic saved his life. The day I got his letter is the same day I took this out of the window.” Gibby pulled the sign *NO JAPS ALLOWED!* from the back of the cash register and tore it in half. Then half again. He held out his hand. “Welcome home, son.”

(This was first published as 'Two Blind Men and a Fool' on Bewilderingstories.com and won novel of the year. When I first started writing it I had different characters in mind. And then the story spoke to me and different characters emerged. They spoke to me and the story came alive, each character emerging a

By Sherman Smith

INTRODUCING BOB O'BRIEN

Bob O'Brien is a proven author who wrote the true crime bestseller, *Young Blood: the story of the family murders*, published by HarperCollins. The book was nominated for Best True Crime in the Melbourne Writers Festival.



Now he publishes through his own imprint, Percat Media.

As a homicide detective, *Bob* investigated some of the country's most notorious crimes, including cases of murder, drug running and violence. He and his partner arrested Bevan Spencer von Einem, one of Australia's worst murderers.

Bob left policing after thirty years to complete his doctoral dissertation about police serving as peacekeepers. He then turned his hand to running his own business. That business involved the buying and selling of water licences in Australia. He purchased water to the value of over \$100 million for an American investment firm.

Bob turned his hand to writing about his experiences with our most precious resource – water. Politicians have made historic changes to the control of water. These changes have caused states to bicker about its use.

As well, our political masters have allowed the creation of water markets that trade water licences valued at millions of dollars. This trade has created a new class of people – water barons.

As a business owner and a water trader, *Bob* wrote papers about water markets, shared his knowledge of them at national conferences and explained how they worked to visiting overseas delegations. He also co-authored academic papers about the trading of water.

Bob's experience as a police officer, academic, author and water trader, made him realise that there is an important story to be told about water in Australia. *Water Barons: money, politics and the control of water in Australia* is that important story.

Next, his highly acclaimed book, *Khanjar: a deadly game of deceit* was released. *Bob* wrote a crime thriller set in New York, with Middle Eastern politics and the growth of China providing a modern back-story.

EXCERPT FROM KHANJAR: A DEADLY GAME OF DECEIT

... the heavens and the earth were joined together as one united piece. Then we parted them. And we created every living thing from water.

Surah 21 al-Anbiya (The Prophets) Verse 30

PROLOGUE

PALESTINE, 2011

The young man sat on the flat roof of his grandfather's home and looked around as the sun rose from its sleep. The morning promised a beautiful, clear day. He drew in a few deep breaths as the warm rays settled on his face and he relaxed.

The streets were quiet. Traffic that serviced the metropolis known as Jerusalem was not yet moving. The young man took his eyes off the road and reached down and poked a hole with his forefinger in the black plastic surrounding the cylindrical parcel in front of him. He pulled back and the plastic ripped, revealing a prayer mat sealed from years of dust, dirt and heat. He fondled the fabric woven by his grandmother when she was a young woman. He remembered the arthritis and calluses that had developed in her small hands from years of hard work.

The colours in the wool had faded, but the strong pattern woven into the mat was clearly visible. His fingers touched and followed the design lovingly worked into the fabric. He looked around again. The streets were still silent, and he felt the peace of the morning. He slowly, carefully unwound the mat on the roof and moved to his knees.

As he knelt, he reached forward and touched the Lee Enfield .303 calibre rifle that was protected by the *sajjadat salat* and the plastic. His grandfather took the rifle from a dead British soldier many years ago. The weapon was over fifty years old, and his grandfather had rubbed machine oil on all metal parts and worked linseed oil into the wooden stock. The black metal shone like the skin of a snake in the early sunlight.

He waited patiently until a military truck stopped in front of a home two blocks away. The home, built with local stone and finished with a flat roof, was almost identical to his grandfather's house. Soldiers jumped from the rear of the truck and took their positions in the shade opposite the house. Another vehicle arrived and four men got out and moved to the front door.

The young man remembered all the things his grandfather taught him. He lay on the roof and spread his legs apart to steady his lower body. He made sure the rifle barrel did not protrude past the wall of the house, so it could not be seen from the street below. His left hand held the rifle's wooden stock underneath the barrel. With his right hand, he adjusted the rear sight on the weapon to allow for the drop of the bullet over the distance between the two homes. Then, with his right hand, he slowly pulled the rifle's bolt to the rear before firmly pushing it forward. The bolt engaged a bullet from the top of the magazine, and both slid forward. He heard the metallic click as the bolt locked the bullet in the rifle's barrel. As he carefully took aim, he pulled the weapon hard into his right shoulder so the recoil did not bruise his skin.

The young Palestinian had considered for some time whether he should aim for the person commandeering the house or a soldier. He had finally made his decision the previous night. The death needed to have maximum impact.

He sited the rifle on the chest of his target, the Israeli soldier who appeared to be in charge. After slowly inhaling the morning air, he held his breath and squeezed the trigger. The rifle butt kicked into his shoulder, and the slug of lead sped from the barrel. He knew the bullet's deadly arc was true when the Israeli soldier fell dropping his Tavor TAR-21 assault rifle to the ground. The remaining soldiers scattered, taking cover behind their vehicle and the walls of the houses. The new settler who was commandeering the house got back into his car and drove at speed into the distance.

The young man carefully returned the rifle to its home in the prayer mat. He knew a storm was coming. The morning peace had been broken, and soldiers of the Israel Defence Forces would quickly rally and punch into the district, raiding homes of known and suspected militant Palestinians. His grandfather's house would be one of many homes searched. It had happened before.

He moved quietly to the ladder and stepped from the roof. Reaching the floor, he rolled off the last rung and saw his father staring at him with tears in his eyes. His father slapped him. Shocked, he returned his father's stare, his anger rising.

'You are not the boy I raised.'

INTRODUCING ERIC ROBERT NOLAN



Poetry, for me, is the only adequate form of expression. I began writing poetry as a young boy and, even then, I recognized the power of precise language in commanding the attention of others.

I can't say that I was terribly good at it – even by the time I became a young man. I studied poetry at Mary Washington College here in America, and my classmates

probably had to test the limits of their diplomatic language when providing me with feedback. (Like most writers, I suppose, I've produced my share of clumsy work.)

I improved through practice. (If you love something enough, you will inevitably get better at it through frequent returns to its labours.) It certainly didn't hurt that I adored a few timeless, rich and resonant voices that are perfect inspirations for a young writer: W. H. Auden, William Butler Yeats, Edgar Allan Poe, Susan Mitchell and Algernon Charles Swinburne.

I only began seriously seeking publication when I was just shy of 40 years old. I was welcomed by some extraordinarily kind people in the indie lit community. My first professionally published poems were accepted by *Dead Beats Literary Blog* and by Dagda Publishing in Great Britain. Then came acceptances by *Illumen*, *Dead Snakes*, *Every Day Poets* and *Peeking Cat Poetry Magazine*.

Today, I've seen my writing published by 55 publications across 10 countries: the United States, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Germany, Romania, Turkey, India, Singapore and Australia. I've also been lucky enough to see my work appear in 22 anthologies, three chapbooks, and six mini-books. I was one of eight poets worldwide selected for *The Galway Review 12*, the Irish journal's 2024 poetry anthology. And the Chinese Poetry Association thrice translated my work for the global readership of its *Poetry Hall* quarterly bilingual journal.

My journey has been made far richer by my fellow travellers. Poetry is an avocation through which I've met the best and kindest of friends – people who are thoughtful, encouraging, and especially empathic. Sometimes they are people who feel lost in the world, as I am occasionally prone to feeling.

And I learn from them. My fellow “verse-nerds” are exceptionally adept at communicating with sensation, imagery and rhythm. I am a student of people who I like immeasurably; I can't imagine a more fortunate tutelage.

If you'd care to keep up with my various misadventures, you can always find me at my writing blog, ericrobertnolan.com. I wish you the best of luck with your own writing journey!

A SELECTION OF POEMS by ERIC ROBERT NOLAN

Blue

Blue is burning bright and deep
in the gardens of my sleep.
The ordered flowers of my dreaming
mirror summer midday's gleaming,
at attention, standing guard,
all about a child's yard.

I am aging now. Does this
set the night to reminisce
and move my dreaming eye to roam
the backyard of my boyhood home?
There a firm azure replaces
all the old remembered faces.
There the bright battalion smoulders —
upright rows of bluebell soldiers.

“Ode to a Polish Plum Cake”

Infused in crumbling crust
is delectable violent violet —
a pounded plum,
a welt of fruit.
Oh, if my lips could peruse
that square and powdered sugar-bruise.

“yummelons”

yummelons —
fruits so sweet on puckered lips
that juiceruns on your sugaredtongue and
wordsmerge in delectablelisp.

“prayer upon an empty hilltop”

what stars I find will usher me,
the moon will beam camaraderie,
what winds will wind around my ears
will bend to answer for my fears.

between them, all the endless space
will draw eternity to face
with vast and reassuring mien
the quandaries of the unserene.

here, the shade of me will mark
a figure in the violet dark.
all the hilltop consorts know
identity's illusion, though.

let starlight penetrate my skin,
the moon expand to let me in,
the winds, again, absorb my voice,
if retrieval be their choice.

“The Southern Diner Short Poem”

How about some mozzarella
for this 50-year-old fella?
Gimme just enough eggs and cheese
to stop my frikkin' arteries, please.
Share your cheer and take my money.
No, I don't mind if you call me “Honey.”

INTRODUCING GREG MILANO

(writing under the pen name of Orion Gregory)

Chasing down clues, discovering hidden motives, and solving crimes have always been a passion for Orion

Gregory. He discovered his love for the genre when, as a young boy, he read his first Agatha Christie novel.



After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Communications from Wright State University, he earned numerous awards as a writer in the newspaper and advertising industries. For several years, he also served as a contributor to a national sports magazine.

While raising a family with his wife Fran, Orion earned a living as an account representative for 25 years.

He now spends the majority of his time producing exciting, fast-paced murder/mystery novels, and coaching and teaching his favourite sport, tennis.

He recently completed his second novel, "Serves You Right", an exciting thriller about a vigilante taking revenge against criminals who managed to escape justice. Orion resides in Southwest Ohio, and always welcomes reader feedback and comments (@oriongregory.com).

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER TWELVE OF "SERVES YOU RIGHT":

After several days of navigating the dark web, Syd felt as though she wanted to throw up...or at least, take a hot shower. At first, she discovered sites offering discounts on products such as designer tennis shoes and handbags. She stumbled upon self-help pages, providing details on everything from "Becoming More Organized" to "How to Cure Acne."

More disturbing were pages soliciting drugs, fake prescriptions, firearms, and stolen credit cards. A hired killer was advertising their services to terminate anyone from private citizens to prominent politicians. It was the human-trafficking and other demented sites, however, that damaged her soul.

A young girl pleaded for someone to kidnap her. Another person advertised a book on how to cook human flesh. Someone else provided information on how to dismember and consume various parts of a woman's body.

As a detective, she wanted to track each individual and incarcerate them. But becoming the chief whistle-blower on the dark web wasn't what Pratt had in mind. She needed to uncover specific sites discussing the Walsh County Police and the vigilante killer. Pratt had suggested several websites to peruse, along with some general instructions on search engines.

Using the term "police departments - Ohio" in her search engine, Syd sought to uncover whatever information was available on Walsh County. Many on the dark web professed an interest in protecting society from authority figures, with cops at the top of the list. Some wanted to defund police departments in their cities, while others advocated for firing - or even killing - police officers. The anti-police narrative was disturbing, but Syd felt these weren't the individuals who would promote ridding society of unpunished lawbreakers.

Revising her search to include words that aggrandized vigilantism, she uncovered several sites that discussed the ongoing situation in Northeast Ohio. Judging by the dates of the posts, none occurred before the attacks had begun. The only page where someone claimed to be the person committing the attacks was 'Real Vigilante.'

Syd had a few concerns about The Enforcer's post. For one, they mentioned Walsh County as if it were their own backyard. It seemed strange for an outsider to make such a claim. Secondly, the information they provided was precise and could only be known by either the culprit or someone who had conducted a thorough investigation. And the data was current and precise.

In her training, Syd had studied people who confessed to crimes they didn't commit. Some were coerced under duress during interrogation. Others wanted to achieve notoriety. Neither seemed applicable here. Perhaps this was a crackpot, but she didn't think so. Perhaps they yearned for a justice the law-and-order system was incapable of delivering.

INTRODUCING ROB JUNG

Born in the wine country of California; grew up in a beautiful, little Mississippi River town in Wisconsin; educated in the Minnesota State University system and Harvard Law School, Rob Jung now lives the writer's life in suburban St. Paul, Minnesota.



A life-long student of history, geography and religion, Jung has travelled in every continent except Antarctica, and his stories often find their origin in historical events discovered in his travels.

His first book, *Cloud Warriors*, a paranormal thriller, arises from a genetic anomaly; the existence of a white-skinned, fair-haired tribe that lived atop the Andes Mountains in the time of the Incas.

His most recent novel, *Judgment Day*, is a psychological thriller and the third and final novel of the *Chimera Chronicles*, a trilogy that started with *The Reaper*, a story that begins with the disappearance of a painting by Spanish artist, Joan Miro, and continues with *The Sower*, a mystery featuring a struggling painter, his powerful, estranged mother, and a transgender private detective in a race to solve a cold case murder, all revolving around that still lost painting.

Jung is a member of The Loft Literary Society, Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America, and is the producer and host of Minnesota Mystery Night, a live monthly conversation among mystery writers and their fans, and a radio show, *Masters of Mystery*.

Current projects include an experimental novel written by 5 mystery writers, two paranormal thrillers, an electronic fiction writers' catalogue and a noir radio mystery drama.

In addition to writing and producing, Jung is a gourmet chef, inventor, entrepreneur, gardener, professional fisherman, and lover of baseball, classic cars, jigsaw puzzles and cold press coffee.

Information about Jung and his writing can be found: at (i) his website: www.robjungwriter.com; (ii) his monthly newsletter, *The View from Middle Spunk Creek*; and (iii) on FaceBook and LinkedIn.

Here's more detailed information:

Born: March 5, 1943, in Petaluma, California

Newspaper writer (mostly sports) from 1962-69 [Winona (MN) Daily News, Mankato (MN) Free Press, Duluth (MN) News-Tribune]

Graduated Winona (MN) State College with BA in sociology and political science, 1969.

Graduated, Harvard University Law School with juris doctor degree, 1972.

Still "practicing" law 53 years later (I'll get it right, eventually).

Married: Kathleen Jo Stoller-Junghans, June 2, 1979. Three children (2 by prior marriage); four grandchildren, one great-grandchild. Scores of "adopted" children of all ages, sizes, shapes and colours.

Resident of Twin Cities since 1972.

*Rob Jung is the pseudonym of Robert William Junghans.

EXCERPT (CHAPTERS 1 & 2) OF 'CLOUD WARRIORS'

CHAPTER ONE

They emerged from the dense undergrowth without the rustle of a leaf or stirring of the humid air, three hunters warned by instinct that something was not right. They stopped less than fifty feet from Professor Terry Castro's camouflaged observation post, completely naked except for the ochre paint covering their faces and the bows strapped to their backs.

He studied the three men: all well over six feet tall with light-coloured skin, dirty yellow hair, and ice-blue eyes. Sinewy muscles stood out like ropes under taut skin. Gnarly hands and

large feet, flaccid genitalia, bodies nearly hairless; only flared nostrils and darting eyes moved as they sought the source of discord in their jungle.

Castro checked the four students with him in the narrow observation post, each handpicked to be part of the Berrie University summer anthropology program. They sat as statues with mouths agape, staring at the clearing. When Castro looked back, the hunting party had melted into the jungle. He prayed that the remote cameras had been working.

They exhaled in unison, smiles beginning to spread across faces as they realized they had just been first hand witnesses to history. Tom Wise, the only underclassman in the group, began to rise. Castro raised his hand, palm out, to signal stop.

S-s-s-THUNK!

Feathers quivered inches from Castro's right ear, attached to a short shaft buried in a tree trunk that was part of the back wall of the observation post.

"Get down!" Castro shouted as he dove for the dirt floor.

Fear mingled with sweat from the heat and humidity. His clothes stuck to him like a second skin as he waited for the next arrow. The acrid smell of urine permeated the air. Castro turned his head slightly and saw a wet stain spreading on the back of khaki shorts worn by a student he had thought would become the leader of this group. A muffled whimper escaped from another student as she tried to keep her terror under control. They all lay against the back wall, instinctively curled in foetal positions with their arms and hands covering their heads. One student's shoulders convulsed as he sobbed silently.

A minute passed. Two. Musty dampness seeped into their skin from the earthen floor. The fetid odour of decaying vegetation mixed with the smell of urine and fear as the five inhaled the primordial soup that one hundred percent humidity created. An eternity passed, it seemed, until the chirrup of a bird broke the quiet. A monkey chattered. Castro became aware of the buzz and hum of insects. The jungle slowly regained its rhythm.

Carefully he rose to one knee and peeked through a crack in the wall of vines and bamboo. The clearing was as it had been, no sign of the strange white-skinned hunters. Slowly the four students gathered their courage and stood. Castro motioned them to evacuate the blind. Once outside, they turned and began a measured retreat to their Toyota Land Cruiser, single file with Castro in the rear, afraid to look back; scientists no longer, just survivors.

Castro had warned the students that the trip could be dangerous, but he had meant disease or injury. Nothing in his experience suggested that the inhabitants of the Peruvian Amazon would be hostile. The central Amazon basin had its alleged head hunters, but that was a thousand miles to the east and a century ago. Yet he couldn't shake the thought: I should be dead. They must shoot flying birds and running animals for survival. Six-foot-three, two hundred fifteen-pound, stationary Dr. Terry Castro should have been an easy target.

"The arrow!" he blurted.

They stopped in mid-stride at the exclamation. He ordered them to continue to the truck and wait for him. He was going back for the arrow.

Castro cautiously retraced his steps to the observation post, his eyes darting as he strained to see through the dense curtain of foliage on both sides of the path. Only vines, bromeliads, orchids, ferns, bamboo, and bugs suspended in shafts of sunlight sifting through the green canopy a hundred feet overhead, returned his gaze. The hunters, if they were there, were invisible.

He slid into the back of the observation post, wiggling between two palm trunks. The arrow was still there. It seemed small, even frail. He unsheathed his knife and began digging into the tree, careful not to cut the shaft of the arrow. The tree wood was soft and it took only a few minutes to free the arrow.

Castro cradled it in both hands, marvelling at the primitive artistry. The head was three inches long and not more than a half inch wide, barely wider than the shaft itself. It appeared to be made from pounded metal and had streaks of a dark, varnish-like substance covering it. It was set in a smooth wooden shaft, split to accept the arrowhead, which was held in place by a thin piece of hide tightly wrapped and covered with a transparent red substance. Castro rubbed the head with his thumb to see if the dark streaks would rub off. To his surprise two thin lines of red, and then droplets of blood, formed on his thumb. He looked back at the arrowhead and discovered microscopic razor-sharp ridges on the flat sides, running the length of the head.

Odd, he thought as he sucked the blood off his thumb. What's the purpose? He turned to leave.

Standing in the clearing was one of the hunters, the tallest of the three at over seven feet, a blow pipe held by a long angular arm pressed to his mouth.

Castro froze.

It's not an arrow. It's a dart!

Slowly he removed his thumb from his mouth and raised the dart with both hands so that it was in full view of the hunter. Carefully he slid it into one of the observation portals that faced the clearing and balanced it there. Then he spread both arms, palms out, to show he was holding nothing. He made a slight nod toward the dart. Only the hunter's eyes moved.

Slowly Castro backed up, taking his eye off the hunter for only a split second to find the opening in the wall behind him. When he looked back, the hunter and the dart were gone. He wedged himself out of the observation post, took a few tentative steps, then broke into a run. He reached the truck gasping for air.

"Get in the truck," he croaked at the frightened students.

CHAPTER TWO

Amaru Topac sat on his long, bony haunches, chewing seeds of the Devil's Trumpet. He removed the small pouch of prong buck hide from around his neck, pulled open the drawstring and dumped the contents in front of him. Circled by the adult male members of his tribe, all watching silently, Amaru carefully arranged the talismans in a pattern intended to summon the spirits of his forefathers.

Long, tapered fingers caressed each talisman: a bone from the ear of a cougar to hear the wisdom of the spirits, flanked by two tiny feathers from the wing of an Andean condor to carry the spirits to this place. Seven tiny fresh water pearls were positioned below the cougar bone in the shape of the head of a dart, the point aimed directly at Amaru so that the spirits could find their way to him, and, finally, an orb of pure gold, two centimetres in diameter and polished by centuries of use, delicately laid at the point of the pearl dart so that they would know that he, Amaru Topac, was one of them.

Now he needed only to wait for the Devil's Trumpet to take effect; to conjure the spirits. He closed his eyes and rocked back and forth on his large feet as the plant's drugs fused with his mind.

Amaru had returned from the hunt with a story that, were it not for his stature as shaman and chieftain of the two hundred remaining members of the Chilco tribe, would not have been believed. He had seen the people who were the colour of clouds; those who, according to legend, had destroyed the great Incan empire and forced the Chilco to flee their mountain home. Yet he, Amaru Topac, had faced those whose skin was fairer than his own and had single-handedly defeated them. No shaman in the history of the Chilco could make that claim.

There was much rejoicing when the story spread among the clan and a great outcry for celebration, but Amaru's wisdom spanned centuries and he was greatly troubled. He bade them wait until he had consulted the spirits.

Colours of green and blue and pink, flowing interchangeably but never blending began to form on the inside of his closed eyelids, projected there as the Devil's Trumpet took control. Amaru began to hum, and then to chant in a low monotone "um, um um", beseeching the spirits of past shamans to come to this place and share their knowledge, the wisdom of the ages, with him and this remnant of a once great nation.

As always, the vision came first: flames gnawing at a thatched hut, smoke filling the single room. A wraith-like figure scabbled on the dirt floor, his bony fingers snagging leather cords tied around the necks of gourds scattered about the hut, gasping for air. It wiped away burning tears with the back of its hand, but the smoke roiled thicker as fire broke through the roof.

Amaru felt the heat, the pain, the tears as if he was the figure in the dream.

Fighting against the searing heat, coughing, refusing to let pain dominate him, the figure crawled toward the doorway, doggedly clutching the leather thongs. The gourds bounced along the dirt floor behind him. Blisters formed on his face and his lungs gasped frantically as the fire consumed the oxygen. Just as he prepared to surrender himself to the flames, he tumbled headfirst out the door of the hut into the midst of a massacre.

Screams and shouts, grunts, running feet, the crackle of fire and thunder from the long sticks filled his ears as he crawled away from the hut, fighting to breathe the smoke-filled air.

Strong hands lifted him and began to drag him.

“Stop,” he gasped. “The seeds. We must save the seeds.”

Through burning eyes, Amaru watched the arc of a broadsword descending, cleaving nearly in half the young warrior who had lifted the crawling figure. A red spray of blood coloured the dream as the chain mailed arm of a conquistador wrenched a broadsword from the gaping wound. But the withdrawal stopped at midpoint. The dark, Spanish eyes below the iron helmet grew large and round, and then vacant. A second Chilco warrior appeared in the dream, towering over the Spaniard, twisting his lance violently, then jerking it from just below the breast plate of the attacker. Amaru watched the dead conquistador, blood spewing from his gut, fall face first at the warrior's feet.

“Come, Great One. We must leave,” the warrior said with no trace of emotion.

“But we must save the seeds,” the figure repeated through burnt and disfigured lips.

“Go. Run.” The warrior pointed in the direction of the river. “I will get the seeds.”

Amaru and the figure hobbled as one toward the river. A line of tall, fair-skinned Chilco, armed with blow pipes and slingshots, valiantly tried to hold back the conquistadors' advance on the river as others frantically untied large, clumsy dugouts. A young boy ran toward the metal-clad invaders, spinning a sling over his head, but his missile never left the leather strap as a Spaniard on horseback cut him down. The belching smoke from the Spanish guns mingled with the smoke from the burning village as Chilco after Chilco fell before the onslaught of musket balls and steel. A young woman of the tribe, armed only with a hoe, crumpled under the feet of another sword-yielding horseman, her yellow hair and fair skin gone in another gush of red.

Suddenly Amaru could not move, his ankles tangled in the leather cords he was still clutching. Although he had experienced the vision numerous times, Amaru felt the fear, expecting at any moment to be struck down. He was now the figure in the dream.

A strong hand under his armpit lifted him, propelling him toward the river.

“I have them,” the warrior shouted, shoving a seed-filled gourd into Amaru's hands as his long strides carried them the last yards. Amaru felt himself being lifted into a dugout already overflowing with people. The warrior leaned his broad shoulders into the canoe, pushing it away from the shore. As it broke free from the sandy bottom, the warrior shouted “Go” but the shout was cut short by the deafening roar of a long stick. A musket ball pierced the warrior's throat.

The long arms of men and women frantically pulled on the oars, manoeuvring the lumbering dugout out into the strong current where it slowly picked up speed, separating itself from the carnage. Another dugout reached the river's current, and then another. Amaru looked back to the shore. The two remaining dugouts were still tied to their moorings. The slaughter on the river bank was nearly over. The once-mighty Chilco had fallen. The nation of towering, fair-skinned, yellow-haired people that lived high in the Andes Mountains among the clouds; who the entire Incan nation knew were blessed by the Gods, were no more.

The first bend in the river muffled the sounds of the waning battle, and Amaru could hear the roar of white-water in the distance as his spirit rose from the boat, floating upward. The figure, still seated in the dugout, lifted his burn-ravaged face toward the heavens in prayer while still clutching the gourds that contained the herbs and tinctures and seeds from which curare could be made, and by which the Chilco might survive.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Each of my novels is based upon an actual historical fact or event. In *The Reaper*, that event is the disappearance of Joan Miro's mural, *El Segador*, Catalan peasant in revolt, which he had been commissioned to paint by the Spanish Government, for the 1937 Paris Exposition.

The mural became popularly known as 'The Reaper', and it is around that still-lost work of art that this story revolves. The details about the painting, the Paris Exposition, the architecture and art work of the Spanish pavilion, and the Spanish civil war are historically accurate. The story, however, is entirely fictional, as are the characters except (in the case of historical characters) who appear in fictional settings.

'The Sower', sequel to 'The Reaper', continues the story of how that still lost work of art becomes the focal point of the conflict between a rich and powerful woman and her estranged son,

'Judgment Day', the final book of the trilogy, takes the reader on a twisted psychological journey through the mind of the estranged mother, in process solving the mystery of the lost painting, as well as the ultimate resolution of the conflict between mother and son.

'Cloud Warriors' is a paranormal thriller set in the Amazon rainforest and arises from the existence of a white-skinned, blue-eyed, blond-haired confederation of people that lived at the top of the Andes Mountains, above the cloud line, at the time of the Incas.

ROB JUNG

A BUCKETFUL OF COLOURS

(BY MARTIN DIXON)

Monday morning and it is sunny but cool. Delany Quick exuberantly placed the empty cappuccino cup on the counter of the walk-in coffee shop, exaggeratedly but unnecessarily pushed his long black hair away from his face and looked the server firmly in the eye. His dark almost black eyes penetrated but at the same time displayed a humorous twinkle that softened what might have been a most disconcerting stare.

In reply to her question, he said firmly with a sudden, jaunty smile, "What I do madam is sell magic. Delaney Quick at your service. Purveyor of fine magic sparks."

She had spotted this tall, strange man ambling along the pavement giving the impression of someone with a clumpy gait but who had then almost glided into her establishment to sit astride one of the tall counter stools immediately in front of her in the most theatrical manner. He had ordered a cappuccino, "Hot and as strong as you can make it please," and downed it in one motion, without taking breath, without disturbing his moustache and oblivious to the extreme heat. Then issued a long, "Ahhhhhhh.....," and energetically exclaimed, "excellent. Now to start solving some problems." Thus, prompting her question.

She was not intimidated by this person with the shiny, light blue; frock jacketed silk suit, bright yellow bow tie and extraordinary handlebar moustache. His age was indistinguishable. The impression was young but the reality most likely old. For twenty years, she had stood upon this spot dealing with the vagaries and eccentricities of society and Delany Quick certainly caused her no consternation. To humour him she said, "An interesting profession, I'm sure. Is there a market for such magic... sparks, was it?"

"Surely madam," he said with a flamboyant flourish, "as sure as there is sun in the sky and air to breath. I see the world through a rainbow. Imagine, if you will, a bucketful of assorted colours thrown into the air to whirl around, trapped within a revolving wind and you will have an idea of the things I see. I see within this swirl dark holes sitting above people. It's these holes that need sealing. It's these people that need my assistance. I look for them and sell them my wares. If they are receptive of course."

With that, he upped and left in the same dramatic manner, like an actor might as they received rapturous applause, leaving her somewhat bemused to say the least. She had thought she had seen them all but this one was something to be believed all right. A screwball and no mistake.

Tuesday and she is serving a very handsome man that she lavishes a good deal more attention on than she would normally. She is not flirting. She is too shy for that. In fact, she is so painfully shy that when confronted with potential relationships it causes her to withhold any natural attraction from being obvious. She emanates negative signals. This is why she is still single even though she craves a lasting relationship. He is a regular and, unknown to her, actually briskly walks twenty-five minutes from his office to take his lunch break here, just to be served by her. It is an infatuation that he senses is not reciprocated and not being naturally outgoing himself is content with this small moment of intimacy. Fifteen minutes is all he can manage and even that stretches his mandatory, hour long, lunch break.

As he leaves, Delany Quick enters with grace and elegance creating a stir and whisperings within the tightly packed shop. Heads turn as elbows nudge. He takes the seat vacated by Paul because that is his name - the secret admirer and announces with his customary fervour. "Today Annie I will have a straight Americano...."

Before he can complete his speech Annie says, "Black, strong and very hot I assume?"

"Just so, just so," is the extremely buoyant response, "and today I will have one of those homemade flapjacks. Your creations I assume? Is that apricot secreted within? If so, they are just like my aunt who is a master flapjack baker with a certificate and a tendency to add fruit to sweeten rather than excess syrup."

Slightly too flippantly Annie said, "So, did you help lots of people yesterday with all your sparks and stuff? You were off to do an abundance of good deedings were you not? And, anyway, how do you know my name?"

"Alas I did not, the person yesterday was not receptive and there was no market to be had. How do I know your name? I know everything I need to know. It simply just comes to me. I know your name, I know your age and I know the name of your admirer - Paul."

"My admirer? I don't have an admirer. What makes you think he's an admirer?"

"The signs are there for all to see. You should know it's true but you cannot see for the fog that surrounds your consciousness. Search your heart and you'll discover the truth although you might need some help revealing the light. Barriers need to be dismantled."

Delany Quick then dabbed his lips, straightened his moustache, announced that his aunt had competition and swept out onto the fast-flowing pavement to disappear in a metaphorical puff of smoke.

Annie was left in contemplation. She knew the truth but knew she lacked the ability to overcome her affliction.

Wednesday lunchtime and bang on time Paul arrives. There is no seat, so he stands at the counter, orders coffee and a salad roll and senses a change in Annie. She is even more reluctant to speak than before. He tries conversation about nothing in particular but is cold shouldered with Annie keeping her distance. His disappointment is plain, his shoulders slightly slumped as he leaves after only ten minutes.

Right on cue Delany Quick is there sitting on a just vacated stool. She had not noticed his much more subdued entrance. He was wearing his normal attire but seemed somewhat deflated, maybe even displaying a slightly despondent edge.

"Well Annie," he said, "I see no progress has been made. You seemed to have retreated into yourself a bit more. Today is a flat white day I'm afraid and I would like it cool please. Some small hope has just been crushed. Amends need to be made. You are a thirty-eight-year-old, very attractive lady and deserve a happier life. The effort can be immense but the reward far greater. There is a chance to snag a good 'un so to speak and it's slipping through your fingers."

Annie watches as he slowly sips his coffee noticing the complete change of demeanour. "Why the gloom?" she asks.

"It's not so much gloom as a weakening despair. My disposition follows the pattern of life around me. I enthuse, then deflate until a goal is achieved, then I move on."

"Move on to where?" Annie mused.

"Why to the next client of course. To the next person who is so intent on ruining their lives. Did you consider our conversation yesterday?"

"I did and you are right Paul does come here to see me. I could see it in his manner today. He went away disappointed though because I ignored him. All the talk made me hesitant. I found my natural inclination to veer away dominating."

"That's the reason for today's mood then. Tomorrow you will have to do better. Start to believe in yourself and progress will be made. Well, I'm off now. I cannot chit chat with you all day. Things to do you know."

As quick as a flash he was gone and again leaving Annie with much to ponder.

Thursday and Annie is getting anxious. It is two o'clock and Paul has not appeared. But rather than being reserved she finds she is now disappointed. She is continually looking out the window hoping for him to appear, but she knows it is too late. Today she will not see him.

She peered out the window one last time and saw Delany Quick standing there looking at her through the glass. He smiled, a huge grin that made the ends of his moustache twiddle. The smile extended to his eyes that momentarily narrowed slightly and then opened wide concluding in a very deliberate and exaggerated wink. She laughed aloud putting her hand to her mouth attempting to stifle her mirth. The vision that was presented to her was just so outrageous. This outlandishly attired, seemingly ageless person was now blowing raspberries, lips pursed against the glass. She looked around to see if anyone was watching and was dismayed to see that her very busy coffee shop had all stopped and were looking directly at her. With an embarrassed stoop, she smiled nervously and disappeared out the back.

When she returned Delany Quick was seated in his normal spot. "Good afternoon," he animatedly said, with no sign of his previous despondency, "and a wondrous day it is. I see things have changed and progress has been made. Your mood has lifted. You are almost merry. Today I would most enjoy a double espresso, scoldingly hot and very sweet and while I drink that one I would be most obliged if you were to prepare a second. Today I'm feeling jubilant and in need of raisin flapjack. That one there I think."

"But he did not turn up and I don't know what to do." Annie said almost in tears.

"That's the spirit," replied Delany. "That's the response we should have. An injection of emotion."

"But he did not arrive. I'll never see him again. If I don't see him again, I'll be so upset although I'm not sure even if he had been here, I could have mustered the courage to talk to him. You know, in that way. About intimate things. Dating and such like. I'm so nervous I'm beside myself."

"That's how things are. It's natural you know. You just need a little something extra. Just to give you a boost. Well, I'm away now. Thank you for your excellent refreshments." And before she could say any more, he had gone.

Friday morning at ten o'clock and it was blowing a gale outside and lashing with rain. The door was flung open and a very ebullient Delaney Quick entered and, with dramatic over acting, shook a bright orange umbrella free of water.

"A terrible day," he announced as he sat at the counter. The place was nearly devoid of people. "The weather is atrocious. The wind has disturbed my moustache. It will need extra waxing shortly you know. In the meantime, I would enjoy green tea please Annie and yes, no milk and very hot. It's a green tea day. I like green tea at the conclusion of a sale."

"Have you been successful then Mr Quick?"

"I think I have Annie. I think I have indeed. Just one more scene to unfold and that's shortly to occur."

"You're early today," she said. "Do you need to be somewhere later to complete your sale?"

"No, that will be concluded on its own, in its own way and in its own good time. I'm here early to ensure you are ready."

"Ready for what Mr Quick?"

"For him of course. Ready for him. To make that final effort."

"I'm not sure he will come. He did not arrive yesterday, why would he come today?"

"He will come. Yesterday was only a reaction and quickly regretted. Today he will be here at one twenty-five as usual if only to spend another fifteen minutes dreaming of what might be. An infatuation cannot be so easily broken. Now, thank you for the tea. When he arrives, lose your inhibitions and let your passion flow. I'm now off to acquaint myself with my next client."

Delaney Quick picked up his umbrella and strode meaningfully into the street to fade into the gloom of an increasingly incessant downpour, his umbrella bobbing into the distance, the last to be overcome by the mist.

On the counter, Annie noticed a rainbow coloured envelope. There was a small, sparkling, ridiculously bright speck resting on top which she picked up and held in the palm of her hand. It had no substance, no weight and exuded a warmth that crept up her arm and into her heart. There was a sudden searing light, an instantaneous flash and then it vanished. Mystified she put the envelope in her pocket and carried on with her day's work.

At exactly one twenty-five, Paul entered through the door, soaked to the skin, dripping everywhere, and sat at the counter. "Black coffee please and a salad roll," he said, not really looking at her but clearly wanting to.

Annie was nervous. Her natural instinct was to run. It was what she always did when a man she liked spoke to her. But not this time. She found she had the fortitude to speak and found herself saying, enthusiastically blurting out in fact, with free abandon. "Hallo Paul. I know your name is Paul. My friend told me. It is Paul, isn't it? I'm sorry I ignored you. The other day. It didn't mean anything. I was just having a bad day. A rotten day. But today I feel invigorated. I would like to get to know you better. If you wanted that is." She was amazed. The words seemed to just flow, automatically, as though it was her natural inclination. Paul smiled, clearly elated at this outburst. Annie had few customers, so they chatted endlessly, as though they had known each other intimately for an eternity. All thought of work disappeared from Paul's head. It was Friday and that could wait until the next week.

And that was that. A relationship was born that only had one outcome - a happy ending. Sometime later, she found the forgotten envelope secreted in her pocket. She opened it to reveal a bill of sale, "Delaney Quick - Purveyor of The Finest Magic Sparks. Invoice for supplying one Magic Spark of Extra. No charge."

When anyone who knew her, who had futilely been trying to persuade her to be more assertive, asked what had given her the resolve to speak to Paul, Annie replied, "I found that little bit extra, that little spark of magic that made all the difference," and thought of the weirdly delightful man that had imposed himself, so resolutely, upon her life.

Delaney Quick, in his travels, now and again passed the coffee shop and observing Annie with his Kaleidoscope vision smiled when he saw the dark hole above her, that had first attracted his attention, was now completely sealed and was satisfied that she was perfectly settled within his magnificent swirl of never ending colours.

MARTIN DIXON

Please check out my blog at <https://www.shortstoriestoentertain.com>

INTRODUCING ROBERT HART

A bit about me: I grew up motherless and wild, an abandoned G.I. baby, in the bomb-scarred, post-war East End of London. I believed that education was the key to release me and other kids like him, from poverty and



deprivation. I became a teacher, helping children and families from diverse backgrounds. I witnessed the joys and sorrows of many family lives, and I learned from his students how to celebrate them. Now, nearing 80, I'm reflecting on this life, with gratitude and wonder.

I started out as an educator, then digital inventor, social entrepreneur, then international consultant on child safety online. I retired from paid work and became an apprentice ship's carpenter building a huge scale model of the Mayflower for Dartmouth Museum. Now I tinker with wood, tend the garden and write stories.

I write to explore love, loss and the ordinary miracles of life—the compassionate, mystical and whimsical nature of humanity. My stories tend to be fictionalized real experience. Writing them helps me make sense of life. My characters have become my trusted advisers.

My debut novel, [Rebecca's Secrets](#), is a fiction deeply based on my East End childhood and my family's dark secret. My second, [Twice Born](#), tells the story of an older couple and their grandchild, who uncovers a miracle that transforms their lives. It's a magical reality tale for adults, based on real places, real people, a real family tragedy—with more than a sprinkle of mysticism and wonder brought by Real Faeries. I'd love to know what you think of it.

Website: www.roberthart.me

TWICE BORN

Here's a short excerpt from [Twice Born](#).

You are welcome to read more and further excerpts here: [Twice Born](#).

To put it in context: An elderly couple live in a cottage on the banks of the River Dart in Devon, in the shelter of the Hoodown Woods. Their lives have been overshadowed by a family tragedy that tore them apart, long ago.

On a spring day, their granddaughter, Willow, runs in from the garden. "Come Papa, Grandma. Come quick. See what I've found!"

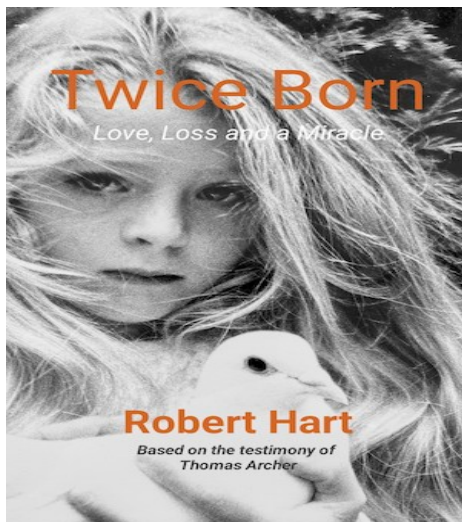
What they discover in the woods will change their lives forever.

Papa Tom is drawn into a quest for learning, but Grandma Naomi has reason to fear the truth he might unleash.

The Archers are pulled back two decades, to confront their painful family loss, then back five generations to the terrible murder of an innocent young mother.

On their spiritual and emotional journey through loss, blame, guilt and despair, they discover the miracle of a love that can transcend death.

This is a story of the power of prayers and promises, and how enduring love can heal the deepest wounds



Willow was Always Ours

When I came to the Glen, I couldn't see Willow.

Sapphire appeared. "Thomas, we are sad. We are exposed. Another human knows an entrance to our tree."

"I am so sorry!" I said, "He just barged in..."

Sapphire interrupted. "...and he found the village. We are now in peril, Thomas. He will tell his friends about us. Your mistake has placed us in danger. Your first promise is broken."

"But, I helped save you from the flood. You saved Willow from drowning in the river. We protected each other. Does that count for nothing?"

"It counts for more than you know, Thomas, but we are now exposed and open to human curiosity, which can only lead to destruction. The love and trust we have between us can no longer prevent that. It is done."

"I understand," I said. I hung my head.

"This day, will you keep your second promise? Will you pass your writing to Willow?"

"I will."

"She will be able to read the Journal in ten years on Mayday when she comes of age. She will then know all that you know, and later, so will all the generations of human kind. Now, will you keep your third promise, Thomas?" She gestured to my chair, to the pennywort leaf on the arm.

I reached for it.

She looked to where a toad was sitting in the shade. The toad turned into a swarm of Faeries and flew into the trees.

I took up the leaf and stared at my last gift of Faerie honey. I looked at the Toad, which had returned.

Sapphire smiled kindly at me.

"Thank you, Thomas, for all you have done for us. We must leave now. We will miss you and Naomi, but our work is done here."

"And Willow?"

"She has always been ours, Thomas. You know this. We told you. We danced her into life. We gave her a name. We gave her Faerie gifts. She will be with us always."

"You mean you will take her away?"

What a stupid bloody fool! I've been tricked. This is what they wanted all along – to take Willow from us!

"You can't!" I shouted.

"Thomas, Thomas, my lovely friend, there is no trick."

"Willow was always ours, from the moment she was conceived. Remember, you even gifted her back to us of your own free will." She held the tiny photograph I gave her of Willow and turned it towards me.

Oh, you idiot, Tom! You gave her away! Your Daisy, your Willow. You clever bloody Faerie! I crumpled to the ground and buried my head in my hands.

ROBERT HART

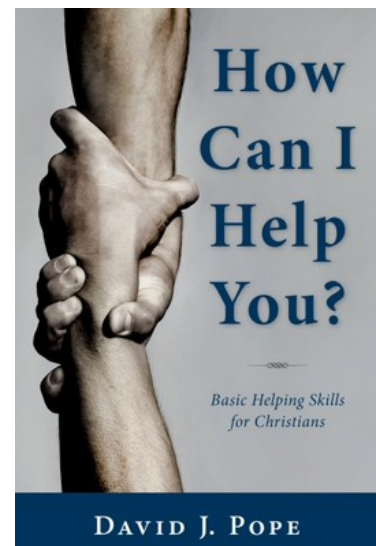
INTRODUCING DAVID J. POPE



David J. Pope worked as a licensed mental health/addiction therapist in Nebraska, Iowa, and Arizona throughout a forty-year career. He has Master's Degrees in Human Relations and Christian Counselling. He lives in Northern Arizona with his wife (her story is in chapter 11).

David J. Pope draws on his experience in the addiction and mental health fields to provide you with practical tips, examples, and guidelines for helping others through a wide range of personal issues.

How Can I Help You? Basic Helping Skills for Christians is your guide to helping others.



THE BASICS OF HELPING

CHAPTER ONE

If you've ever had people come up to you saying, "I just don't know what to do!", "I'm at my wit's end!", "I've tried everything", or "I knew I could talk to you—you'll know just what to do", then you have probably felt some apprehension about your ability to give others the help they desperately seek. How do you help a friend whose child has been caught using meth? How do you comfort a neighbour whose spouse has just died? While the Bible doesn't give us specific instruction on just what to say in these situations, there are principles in scripture and techniques in counselling that can be helpful guides in aiding others.

I think the most important initial consideration is to know where the person is in addressing the problem so far. Proverbs 20:5 states, "Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out." The person seeking your help has probably already tried several things themselves in search of a way out of their quandary; hear them out about their journey thus far. Taking the time to hear someone's story will help you understand how they came to be in their current circumstances. You'll also be able to build your relationship with the person you're hoping to help. I've built some of my most cherished friendships by helping others or having them help me through my personal struggles. This, I believe, is part of the groundwork involved in "bearing each other's burdens" (Galatians 6:2).

THE PROBLEM-SOLVING MODEL

There is a five-step, problem-solving model I discovered long ago that can be helpful as a starting point.

1. Gather information.

An old adage is "a problem accurately diagnosed is 85 percent solved." We need to know what we're dealing with before we can look at what to do about it. Ask questions like "When did the problem start?", "Who is it impacting?", "What have you tried so far?", "How does the problem manifest itself?", "Are there times the problem doesn't occur?" etc. Act like a news reporter just gathering facts. Resist the urge to solve the issue until you've collected all the information you can. Many solutions will emerge simply by taking a broader perspective and looking at what you're dealing with. An example of this occurred in a small town's debate about whether or not to purchase some double-decker buses from England to promote tourism. Amid the debate, one person pointed out the steering wheel is on the opposite side in English buses, making them too expensive to renovate for use in the United States. If the investigation about the issue had uncovered this fact initially, the debate could have been solved immediately.

2. Brainstorm possible responses.

Without making any judgment about the efficacy of a response, think of all the possible responses to address the issue at hand. Be sure to include "Do Nothing," as this is the default option if you don't choose something else. Honestly, sometimes the best thing you can do in a problematic situation is nothing. Investigating available resources is an important part of this step. What tools, programs, success stories or support sources do you have at your disposal? A hypothetical example: If your problem is, being unemployed, possible responses could be: choosing to be homeless, committing a robbery, moving back in with your parents, submitting twenty applications a day, standing on a street corner with a sign, etc. While many of the responses will immediately be seen as ridiculous, by allowing the brainstorming process to sweep with a wide brush, you will take glimpses outside the

box you may feel trapped in, discovering potential solutions you haven't thought of. I'd recommend, in most situations, looking at no fewer than seven options and no more than twenty-five before considering the potential benefits of each.

3. Assess pros and cons.

This is the point at which a potential helper can be most useful, thinking through the likely outcome of various responses to problems. Another adage is, "If you keep doing what you're doing you'll keep getting what you got." Remember the joke about the guy who goes to the doctor and says, "Doc, it hurts when I raise my hand over my head." The doctor responds, "Then stop raising your hand over your head." If what the person is doing isn't making things better, help them admit it. If a particular option has worked well for you or others, you can suggest they give it a try. There may be a response they've tried in the past that would be worth trying now. It's possible the person you're trying to help has been responding in ways that are actually making things worse or causing other issues; telling the person so in objective, nonjudgmental terms may be crucial to their healing. Even the most extreme responses may have some level of validity when you consider the potential impact.

4. Choose, and DO IT!

How many times have you known the answer to a problem but failed to follow through on it? You're going to stay in the hole you're in until you do the work of getting out. I have a lot to say on the importance of accountability in later chapters. Simply stated, checking to make sure a person has followed through on what they've agreed to do may be the difference between success and failure for someone dealing with a difficult problem. I've had many people respond to challenges to change their behaviour with, "Okay, I'll try." I give them the Yoda response: "Try not. Do, or do not. There is no try." Admonish the person to put forth the action and accept the outcome. Of course, the response that's chosen may not actually be successful (as will be addressed in the final step), so a period of trial and error may be needed.

5. Evaluate.

There's a humorous sign I saw that read, "The beatings will continue until morale improves." You may be working hard at a solution that just isn't having the positive effect you had intended. If the solution isn't working, it's time to recommend the person you're helping try something else. Also, the solution may have produced unplanned side effects, which now need to be addressed. As Jesus became more popular, it became more difficult for Him to move about and speak to the people. His solution? He climbed a hill, resulting in the famous Sermon on the Mount, and speaking from a boat to people on the shore, so his voice could carry. The process of evaluation will also help in staying focused on the solution rather than on the problem.

EXAMPLE VS. MORALIZING

One of the most effective group exercises I've used to indicate the power of example is this: I make an "OK" sign with my finger and thumb, and then instruct the group to make the same sign. I then say "now put it on your chin" while at the same time putting it on my cheek. Most people will put the circle on their cheek. Even those that do put it on their chin, as instructed, will hesitate, trying to resolve the conflict between what they see and what they heard. If your example doesn't match your word, you've cheapened the value of your word. James 1:22 states, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

While I understand the need to point out sinful behaviour when you see it, many fail to regard the "restore him gently" part of the instructions in Galatians 6:1. Your grandmother probably told you, "You can catch more flies

with honey than you can with vinegar.” By focusing on an effective response to an issue and being supportive, your ability to be helpful will be aided. If you’re helping someone through a problem you yourself have addressed successfully, think of how others patiently supported you (or how you wished they would have) and show the same patience with the person in need.

TYPES OF HELP

One of the most useful lessons I received during my training for a Master’s of Christian Counselling degree had to do with the importance of knowing at what level to offer help to others. In general, there are four levels of help: 1) Office care, done by counsellors or church staff working in an official capacity. Unless you have specific training, don’t try to provide this level of care, but seek out those that have such training; 2) Sermon care, done by preachers or teachers speaking on a specific topic in a group format to address an issue one or more people are dealing with. If you’re in a position to preach or teach, think about how you can be most helpful to those in your audience through your presentations; 3) Friend care, done by any of us with a person in need we have built a relationship with; and 4) Schmooze care, checking in regularly with people, in an informal manner, about the issues they’re dealing with. This can be very effective, especially if you go beyond simply asking, “How Are You Doing?” to really expressing concern and empathy.

Understand, please, that our role as helpers is not to fix people; let’s let Jesus do the fixing. Our job is to provide support and express concern. People in need must do their own work in solving the problems they face and making the changes they need to make in their own lives. My philosophy is, give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, you feed him for his life. Give him a fish every day, he’ll forget how to fish. There are people that will try to use your good intentions to be helpful to get you to do things for them; resist such appeals by asking the person what they intend to do for themselves, then ask how you can hold them accountable for doing so.

I learned a valuable lesson along this line at a training course on how to counsel others in just a few sessions. They emphasized the importance of knowing what a person you are trying to help is a “customer” for. Imagine going to a department store for a coat and the clerk tries to sell you gloves instead—you’re not going to stay at that store very long. A person may be coming to you for help with their marriage though it is obvious to you they also have an alcohol problem. You won’t be able to address their alcohol problem unless they’re confident you will attend to their marriage issue. One of the things you learn to do in the addiction field is help people with issues they don’t really think are much of a problem. By working with them to discover the areas where they do see a need for help, I was able to show them a broader world of interplay between what they were initially a customer for and what they truly need to address to get to where they need to be. It’s like telling the person coming in for a coat that they’d be a lot warmer if they got a pair of gloves also.

DON’T OUTRUN YOUR HEADLIGHTS

A recovery sponsor I had for many years (may he rest in peace) drilled into my head the principle of not outrunning your headlights, in other words not going beyond your knowledge or capacity. In helping others, you can find yourself in a lot of trouble by trying to help with an issue beyond your ability. When the apostles encountered a demon-possessed person they could not heal (Matthew 17), they went to Jesus for help. One of the smartest things you can do is recognize what you don’t know. I have always had others I can go to for advice or input; they’ve been able to help me avoid many missteps through their guidance.

It's a good idea to know about resources for Christian mental health therapy, for addiction and marital counselling and who can provide quality professional help on a sliding scale. It's valuable to investigate which professionals a person in need may have utilized already and determine if your suggestions match up with what those professionals are telling them. If you find yourself embroiled in a highly emotional issue beyond your capacity, don't be embarrassed to say so—seek support sooner rather than later. Keeping the confidence of the person you're helping is, of course, an important consideration, so make sure that person knows when you seek input from others.

FOUR STEPS TO CHANGE

There are four steps that must be completed in order to change from an unhealthy behaviour pattern to a good one. It is important to know which step a person seeking help is in.

1) Know when you're doing it wrong. The Living Bible paraphrase renders Jeremiah 6:14 as "You can't heal a wound by pretending it's not there." The first step in change is to recognize the problem for what it is. Admitting when you do something wrong is a prerequisite to doing it better next time.

2) When you do it wrong, correct it right away. I'll be reviewing the 12 steps later in the addiction chapter; Step 10 of the 12 steps instructs us to continually examine ourselves and, when wrong, promptly correct it.

3) Do it right more often. After we become proficient, in recognizing when we're doing wrong and fixing it promptly, it's time to start catching ourselves before we do the wrong thing. I believe keeping track of successes is more motivating than just keeping track of failures.

4) Do it right consistently. Though we won't likely be perfect in ending all bad behaviour, we can reach a point where bad behaviour is no longer our norm and our natural tendency is to make the right choice. I've heard that if you do the same behaviour nineteen times in a row your brain will construct a pathway from the start of the behaviour to the end of it, so it's easier to do the behaviour without thinking about it. If you doubt this, look at which shoe you tend to put on first, then try to put on the other shoe first tomorrow. It will take an enormous amount of concentration to change your unconscious patterns. While that's obviously a burden when the behaviour is destructive, it's a blessing when we develop healthy disciplines.

DOS AND DON'TS

DO pray before and during the helping process. I take a broad view of James 5:16 "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Having a connection with God is the best mindset to start with in serving others.

DO remain patient, calm, and steady. When working at a group home with very troubled teen girls it was made crystal clear that, we, as staff, were to be the solid object in a river of turmoil. The parable about the house built on the rock applies when helping others. Your care and love for others doesn't require you to match their level of panic or woe.

DO take care of yourself. My mother (may she rest in peace) would often make herself stressed worrying about someone else's issues. It's harder to help others if you take on their

Problems. I have often been asked, in my profession as a therapist, "Don't you have trouble taking people's problems home with you?" My response is, "I don't take them to the parking lot." I call it professional jadedness. It's not that I don't care; I just realize my stressing about someone else's issues isn't going to help them and can only harm me. Your own peace and contentment are a prerequisite to helping others find their own peace.

DO seek support when needed. You're not going to have all the answers and when we need help ourselves, we need to seek it. I can't count the number of times someone has come to me for help with an issue I too was in the process of dealing with. It seems to me these occasions are serendipitous, God giving both of us a chance to help each other and seek mutually supportive solutions.

DO be the best example you can be. A genuine, conscientious Christian can help many people simply by living a Godly life and being a model for others. It is said, "Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words."

DON'T condemn. You can admonish someone without being their judge. Focus on the behaviour and its consequences, not the person and their flaws. Look at how gentle Jesus was with repentant sinners, as opposed to his harsh statements about the behaviour of the religious leaders. I have been blessed with the ability to see the good in every person I've dealt with professionally (murderers, child molesters, sociopaths, etc.). While their behaviours are often abhorrent, as many of our sinful behaviours are, all people are creations of God and have the capacity for repentance and redemption if they seek it.

DON'T go beyond your relationship with the person in need. The saying is, "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." Examine your motives; if you see you're seeking personal credit or approval rather than acting out of a true desire to be of service, it might be time to back off.

DON'T give up! Change is a marathon, not a sprint, so don't quit while the process is still going on. This doesn't mean keep doing things that aren't working but keep striving to be of aid to others when possible. Don't be discouraged if the person you're helping has a setback or becomes embroiled in the same issue again. Stay in the battle and celebrate the victories whenever they occur.

DON'T push! Unsolicited advice is usually perceived as criticism. It's okay to ask if you can help someone; but, if the offer is declined, accept their decision. You're not in a position to force anyone to be who you think they should be even if you believe you have justification for calling them out. Matthew 18 has a great guide on how to address those in sin who reject admonition.

DON'T miss the chance to build friendships. While the focus will be on the problem during the helping process, bonding with one another is a blessed by-product of these encounters.

By DAVID J POPE

INTRODUCING JANSEN SCHMIDT

I grew up in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in northern California, the youngest of two children to a middle-class family of modest means. After high school, I earned my Associates Degree from the local community



college and started my thirty-year career in the legal profession, working my way up from receptionist to paralegal. Ten years ago, my husband and I purchased an 1870's Victorian home and moved to Vicksburg, Mississippi where we owned and operated a bed & breakfast.

My writing career began in late 2008, resulting in a completed manuscript that has yet to be revisited even though it's actually not that bad. From that accomplishment, I learned that, while I had good natural instincts when it comes to storytelling, I knew absolutely nothing about the craft of writing. I joined several writers' groups and soaked in more information

than any one person should about a particular subject. After countless rejections with my new polished manuscript, I decided to try my hand at self-publishing. I contacted the good folks at Book Baby who brought my book into the world and thus began my foray into the world of indie publishing.

To date I have five published manuscripts under my pseudonym Jansen Schmidt, all of which have won one or more awards, and I have several projects in the pipeline. My first series, The Grounded series, has strong roots in romantic mystery and suspense, while my second series, The Family Ties series, focuses more on a woman's journey from brokenness to wholeness. These books are shelved under both romance and women's fiction.

For more information about me, my books, or to sign-up for my bi-monthly newsletter please visit my website:

<https://jansenschmidt.com/>

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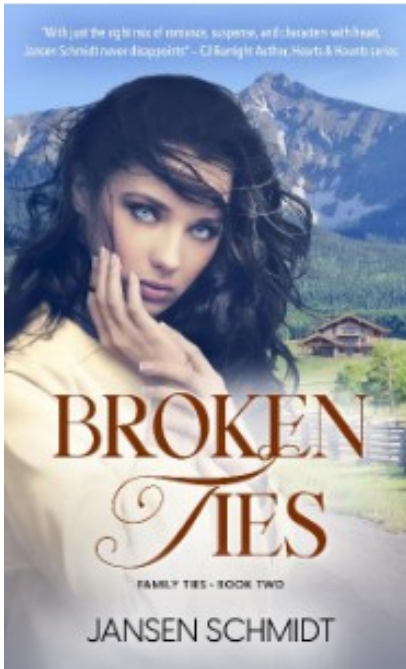
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CHAPTER ONE (BROKEN TIES)

“Don’t stop,” Bailey Philipelli sang with gusto, tapping her fingers on the warm leather-wrapped steering wheel of her Mazda MPV, in time with the music, nearly drowning out Journey’s recorded voices. She let the music consume her, wanting to keep the good vibes and good feelings forever in her soul. Her road to happiness had been long and seemingly insurmountable, but today, she stood on the cusp of a new journey and couldn’t wait to start her future in a happier world. With any luck, the euphoria radiating from her body would never go away. In four short days, she’d be wearing the floor-length creamy confection of silk and lace, spread with care across her

back seat, down an aisle strewn with rose petals, stand next to her fiancé of almost six months, and vow to love, honour, and cherish him forever.



She wiggled the fingers on her left hand, enchanted by the burst of rainbow flecks shimmering from the centre diamond on the yellow gold band. Her cheeks lifted as happiness curled the corners of her mouth upward. For too many years, she’d never imagined finding this kind of happiness. Not only had her mother completed a major transformation, following a years- long prison stint, but she’d finally found a man who loved her: for real this time. Some days she still wondered at her luck in winning Lowell’s affection. There’d been a tense moment or two, early in their relationship, when she’d questioned his sincerity, and one fearful moment when he’d been drunk, when she’d forgotten about his dangerous side. She should have known better than to provoke him with her silly questions, but she’d grown so comfortable in their relationship, she’d forgotten how volatile his moods could be. He apologized later and promised never to do it again. Despite all that, she knew he loved her.

And she’d spent every minute of every day since, trying to please him and steer clear of his mood swings, confident, despite what others told her that people could change if they really wanted to.

She pulled into the driveway of the three-bedroom ranch-style house she’d shared with her mother for the past year. Luke Wainwright still owned the house, but he’d rented it to her when he’d moved into her best friend’s, Shiloh Ferguson, remodelled farmhouse on the other side of town after they’d married.

Killing the engine, she took a visual tour of the property, a house she’d only call home for four more days. Early morning sunshine bathed the house in warm, golden light.

Before moving here, she’d lived in the narrow drafty, olive-green, spare room, in the back of her great-aunt’s dingy, gray, singlewide trailer. She’d grown fond of Luke’s place, feeling for the first time like a “real” person with a “normal” life instead of a walking carcass, hollow and aimless, worthless, alone in a world where no one knew how to treat her right. Her life changed for the better when Shiloh came back to Twisted Fork and established an equine therapy facility at her father’s old ranch. If not for Shiloh’s kindness, patience, and perseverance, Bailey would most likely still be waiting tables at her aunt’s diner and skulking after good-for-nothing men who only wanted a woman to aid and abet in their criminal activities. And occasionally beat the crap out of.

She sighed and forced her shoulders back. Her pulse zoomed as she gathered the wedding gown from the back seat, carefully draping it over her arm. In a matter of minutes, the cool softness would caress her skin, when she'd model the gown for her mother.

She imagined twirling in front of the floor-length mirror in the master bedroom, the room she'd insisted her mother have when she moved in. With an imaginary bouquet in her hands, she'd pretend to be walking down the aisle, stepping with one foot first then easing the other slowly in front of it, as the attendant from the bridal shop had shown her.

Stifling the urge to skip, she held the dress up high enough so its protective plastic covering wouldn't brush the ground, and made her way toward the house, stepping right first, then sliding her left foot forward, sliding right, sliding left. She giggled at the somewhat awkward gait, but practiced the stilted steps all the way to the front door, reminding herself not to look at her feet. The attendant at the bridal shop had been adamant about that part.

"Whatever you do, don't look down. Just keep your eyes glued to that handsome man waiting for you at the altar."

Wanting everything to be perfect on her special day, she rehearsed the walk everywhere she went. Even when working with the horses or shovelling manure from the stalls in Shiloh's barn; she paraded around in careful gliding steps. Shiloh's adopted daughter, Ada, the soon-to-be flower girl, had quickly adopted the walk, following her around the ranch with the same lyrical cadence.

"I'm home," she sing-songed as she pushed open the front door. She'd practically begged her mother to accompany her to pick up her gown, veil, shoes, and other accoutrements, but her mother had insisted she go alone. Not being a morning person, the final fitting appointment at seven-thirty this morning, didn't jibe with her mother's night owl personality. "I'll have a surprise waiting when you get back," her mother had promised last night before Bailey had gone to bed.

She looked around the living room for the balloons and party decorations she'd imagined would fill the room when she arrived, the bridal shower she'd never had.

"Mom?"

Still cradling the gown, she went to the kitchen and peered around the corner, ready to act surprised if the room was full of people anxious to congratulate her and get the party started. She frowned at the ominously silent kitchen, no cake or party snacks anywhere to be found. With a frustrated sigh, she retraced her steps, heading down the hallway toward the bedrooms. Muffled voices and soft giggles emanated from behind the closed master bedroom door.

Bailey smiled. "Good one, Mom," she said softly. "Hide the guests in the bedroom. Sneaky."

Tiptoeing closer, she stifled the giggle threatening to escape at her idea of turning the tables on them, bursting through the door and yelling surprise instead of letting it happen the other way around.

Although muffled, Bailey recognized her fiancé's voice, followed by her mother's more excited one.

"Hurry. She'll be home any minute."

As usual, her mother hadn't planned accordingly and now Bailey was going to ruin the surprise by arriving home before everything was in place. She stuck a knuckle between her teeth and bit down. She should wait until everything was perfect before barging in, but excitement bubbled to epic proportions inside her body. Most likely, they were putting together the photo collage for the reception, showcasing photos of her and Lowell over the past year.

She touched the handle then pulled her fingers away and bounced around in a circle. Her shoulders hunched as anticipation pinged along every nerve. She strained to hear the muffled words through the wooden door. Unable to squelch the urge any longer, she turned the knob and stepped into the room.

“Surprise!”

Several things happened at once, but her mind switched into super slow motion and registered one single snapshot: her mother’s arched back, naked breasts bouncing, her bare ass gripped in Lowell’s hands.

The words “Bailey” and “shit” oozed through the gel of confusion muddling her brain. Naked bodies tumbled to the floor. Bedding twisted around exposed body parts.

The dress slid into a puddle of ivory silk, iridescent sequins, and crystal beads.

By JANSEN SCHMIDT



This book received a 5-star Reader’s Choice award, one of the largest book review and award contest sites on the Internet that recognize exceptional products from exceptional independent authors.



It also earned a Literary Titan 5-star gold award. The Literary Titan Gold Award is bestowed on books that were found to be perfect in their delivery of original content, utilizing fresh themes to convey innovative ideas, and deftly uses elegant prose to transform words into expertly written literature.

Broken Ties is available in both electronic and paper formats from most popular retailers. For more information or to get your copy, use this handy link: <https://jansenschmidt.com/broken-ties-book/>

JANSEN SCHMIDT

INTRODUCING LA BOURGEOIS



Hi! I'm LA Bourgeois, the Lesbian Housewyfe. And since I use the term "Housewyfe" I like to make it clear that I am not a weirdo politically conservative lesbian who role-plays some kind of strange subservient relationship with her wife. Though if you do this and like it, have fun? To each their own!

Who I AM is a 55 year old lady who appreciates being called Ma'am, loves her little Mackalacka dog, and is looking forward to celebrating my 33rd anniversary with my sweet love in November. In my work, you'll find gardening and other household tips, celebrations of baking, knitting and jam-making and nostalgic comfort alongside the occasional dive into political rants... I mean, explanations of issues affecting women and the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

Find my first book, *Diary of a Lesbian Housewyfe*, in most online bookstores and in your library app. And you can get delightful Diary entries from the Lesbian Housewyfe each week by subscribing at lesbianhousewyfe.substack.com.

P.S. I'm also a Kaizen-Muse Certified Creativity Coach who focuses on empowering writers to share their work with the world. From forming a creative habit to creating a platform to self-publishing your fifth book, we use mindfulness, intuition, and creative self-talk to make continuous improvement through small steps. Get more information at labourgeois.substack.com.



THE NAME OF THE WORRIER

Inside every person lives two worriers. One propels you forward, looking for ways to alleviate the irritation. The other stops you in your tracks, transforming you into a fear-infused icicle. The trick is to learn which one to listen to and which one to slap.

Isn't that how the saying goes?

Worrying is a tradition in my family. "But what will you do if..." is the question we're confronted with when we begin to embrace a big dream.

- "What will you do if no one publishes you?"
- "What will you do if you can't make enough money?"
- "What will you do if no one magically shows up at your house to clean it?"

I mean, clean my own house, right? Don't I call myself a Housewyfe?

Just because the floor changes colour when I mop doesn't mean I'm not mopping. It just means I'm not mopping often.

The worrying traps me in a sticky gray pudding. Breaking the surface means holding my breath, leaning back, and floating until my body bobs against the side of the bowl.

Finding that side of the bowl means making fun of the "Worrier" who's taken charge of my being.

In order to do that, I've decided to name them. After all, it's hard to ridicule someone who has no name. Unless you're going to just shout, "No name! No name!" But that doesn't seem very sophisticated.

After all, they both take so much of their time and spend it with me. They deserve a little sophistication.

So, the one whose actions keep me from doing something stupid, who worries that I'll fall off the edge of the cliff and keeps me behind the fence, who nudges my knitting needles back into my bag when the twinges of pain appear, who taps me on the shoulder as I'm about to order the next glass of wine and says, "What's on your list of things to do tomorrow?"

She's kind of sweet. I mean, she doesn't keep me from doing all the stupid things but so far, no one else has been able to either. I'll call her Mrs. Warte, the kindly old lady who sits in her rocking chair and guides with previous knowledge and what she heard from her friend that happened to her friend's sister-in-law's cousin twice removed. She also excels at internet research in the middle of the night.

And then there's the sneaky fear-based anxiety type of worry. This is the one that makes me freeze, flee or fight. Really, I'm more of the freezing type. If I was an animal, I'd be one of those fainting goats, constantly startled and falling over in the barnyard. When she arrives, my mind goes blank, my body stops breathing, and my eyes go blind as my mind races around to find its place in the conversation. What do I say next? How do I respond?

If you've asked me a question and I say, "That's a good question," it's safe to assume this is what's happening to me. "That's a good question" is an automatic response from my operating system.

The name for this sneak thief of joy, this punch of fear in my belly, is Angsty Rita. She's the one who inspired this derivative lyric, sung to the chorus of 80's Top 40 Hit, Warrior.

*Curled into a ball and crying
Sob, Sob!
I Am The Worrier.*

Angsty Rita is who kept me thinking about cancer while I waited for benign results, who makes me obsess about whether or not the editor read my query letter, who jostles me awake in the middle of the night to talk about how I could have handled that conversation with better with that groundskeeper who admonished me for walking Mack the Dog on the golf course.

"This isn't a park! It's only for members. Can't you read?" He gestured to the brand new sign forbidding neighbours from the course.

"I rent my house from the owner."

"Oh, that's okay then," and he turned away and strode back to the clubhouse.

I managed to overcome the menopause rage and didn't scream at his back, "But why can't the neighbours walk their dogs here?! What's wrong with that? No one is even golfing right now!" Instead, I walked home grumbling under my breath about ridiculous elitists who take up all this pretty ground for a stupid game.

Occasionally, when Angsty Rita gets a little too bossy, I will invite her cousin, Marga Rita, to the pity party. Old Angsty shuts up after Marga has her say.

Oh, yes! Naming these two worriers has already caused my shoulders to drop and my heart to ease in relaxation. Gratitude fills me as I think of saying, "Thank you, Mrs. Warte," when she reminds me to rearrange my side table so my magazines don't plunge behind the sofa.

And joy suffuses my being as I interrupt Angsty Rita's harangue about the bank account balance by slapping her.

Yep. I feel better already.

LA BOURGEOIS