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FAQs

--What's the favorite aspect of your job?

I guess since writing is basically a solitary activity—I work in my office at home, essentially alone, no bosses, no co-workers—one of my favorite things to do is get out and meet people. Especially at book signings, or when I'm a guest speaker at literary functions, or when I'm asked to give a lecture or teach some aspect of writing. On those days I have the chance to interact with people who perhaps are fans of mine, or who are would-be writers.

It takes about one year to write a book then another year for it to get published. So the response from my fans is for something I've done two years before. Being out with people is like being a stage actor: If you do something good you get immediate applause. Of course if you've written something bad, you get immediate boos.

--What's the least favorite aspect of your job?

Steinbeck once said something to the effect that a writer is constantly striving to find the perfect word, the perfect sentence, the perfect paragraph, the perfect story. Such a thing is impossible, of course, though some writers are better than others. It's the way of things. But we all work hard for that perfection, knowing that it's impossible. And yet continuing to reach for it is often very frustrating.

--How much education does it take to be a good writer?

That's impossible to answer. I know writers who have their B.A.s in English lit, and their MFAs in novel writing who are commercially lousy. And I know a whole bunch of writers who just made it through high school and are fantastic. Hemingway won the Nobel Prize but his principle education was with the Kansas City Star.

The major requirements, I guess, would be a huge amount of curiosity about absolutely everything and everyone; a voracious appetite for the written word—read everything you can get your hands on, from religion to physics, from psychology to philosophy and back. Read newspapers and magazines and on line information and opinion sites. Read novels and poetry and history and biography. Never stop reading. And if you have any sort of talent at all, an MFA won't hurt, but it may not necessarily help either.

The way to learn how to write is simple: Just write. Everyday put words on paper (or on the screen) and compare your stuff with what you see in print. And then—continue writing.

--What skills do you need to be a successful writer?

Persistence (giving up is failure), humility (we can't write the perfect sentence, so live with it), egotism (because we know that we can if we just try a little harder), knowing somebody in the business (who can give you advice, introduce you to publishers, editors, agents) and whole bunch of luck.

--What does it take to move up as a writer?

Being creative. Writing something that resonates with people, but at the correct time. I mean there were lots of books written about English boarding schools and wizards and witches, but nothing resonated with the times better than J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter stories.

More luck, I'm afraid. But also self-promotion. Going to book signings, writers' conferences, literary societies, book stores and having a strong internet presence; websites, twittering, blogging, face booking, You tubing (is that how it's spelled?). But all of that kind of stuff takes time away from your writing, so you need to do a balancing act.

--What sort of a career should you start with to become an author?

I was with the Air Force as a cryptographer and later in civilian life as a newspaper reporter. Tom Clancy was an insurance salesman. Scott Turow was a lawyer. Robin Cook a medical doctor. Rowling an out of work mother on welfare. Take your pick. But I guess being a newspaper or magazine writer or television writer, would be best. At least you'd be writing for a living while you learned how to write.

--How hard is it to be successful as a novelist?

The New York Times reported no so long ago that more than 95 percent of novelists in the U.S. earn less than five thousand dollars per year writing books. Earning a full time living—whatever you might consider that to be—is very tough. It's a profession of necessity, not desire. You must NEED to be a novelist, all other considerations secondary, to have any shot at succeeding.

And have I mentioned luck?

--Did you always want to be a writer, or was it just a hobby that took off?

Since the fourth grade when my teacher Ms Violet Nelson read *The Little House on the Prairie* and *The Little House in the Big Woods* to us, I knew that I wanted to be a story teller. Nothing really ever changed for me.

--What are some co-curricular activities should a want-to-be writer do to prepare?

Putting words on paper is important, of course. Keep a journal, try writing short stories and compare them to ones already published. I think English classes in school are okay, in that you'll learn to ramble around inside your language—but be careful because most English lit classes will try to get you to write like a bunch of dead writers. Take those classes with a grain of salt. I mean no one writes like Shakespeare these days, do they? I'm not saying to skip those courses, take them and understand the true beauty of the written word. But in the context of its time.

--It there anything else necessary to know about being a writer?

Yup. Being a published author, one who supports himself/herself with their imagination is loads of fun. You'll often be the center of conversation at cocktail parties, if that's important, asked to give speeches, asked to give interviews. Your stuff may be in the Library of Congress, and maybe best of all, someone might come up to you and call you a bad name and tell you “. . . I started reading your book yesterday and it was so good I couldn't put it down till five o'clock this morning. Made me late for work!”

--How do you keep series characters fresh over the long haul?

Actually I don't know what all the fuss is about when it comes to keeping a series character fresh unless the writer tends to be something of a homebody, who seldom goes anywhere, sees no one, participates in nothing.

If you think about it all of your characters are essentially you. So if you are active, if you're constantly learning new stuff, evolving—sometimes radically when you have those “Oh shit,” moments when you discover something new about the world and perhaps therefore yourself, then your character should have these same sorts of epiphanies.

Not to get too deep here, but I guess a main stream devotion of an author should be the study of psychology, especially theories of personality. What makes a person do what a person does? How do you look at your life? Therefore, how does your main character look at his or her life?

You don't actually have to be an assassin or a spy or an astronaut or superman, but damn we have imaginations! This is fun!

--You were a cryptographer in the military and studied science in college, yet you ended up as a reporter for a newspaper and then became a novelist. Why?

For as long as I can remember, since I was a little kid, I've been torn two ways—being a scientist (actually I wanted to be a theoretical astrophysicist), and becoming a writer, especially a novelist.

So I studied and admired guys like Einstein, Heisenberg, Schrodinger and Dirac, as well as Fitzgerald, Hemingway and guys (who were more accessible to my abilities) like Nevil Shute, Ian Fleming, Alistair Maclean and to an extent John LeCarre.

When I actually began studying graduate level physics and math I began to discover that writing was far more important to me. I guess I wasn't enough of a geek after all.

So, Einstein working at a patent office figured out relativity, and Hemingway learned how to write on the Kansas City Star. I chose the Duluth (Mn) Herald & News-Tribune, and the Associated Press, rather than the University of Wisconsin and the University of Maryland Overseas Division in Germany (though I did attend both schools).

No regrets, 'cause in my mind writers are a hell of lot more interesting people than ivory tower folks.

-- How did you do research for The Cabal?

My research for The Cabal (god I love the very notion that the word research brings to mind, which I suppose is the amateur scientists in me) actually has taken about forty years. The fact is I've been studying what I call the geo-political/military situation since I became a cryptographer for the Air Force in 1960. As a kid I was sent to Thule, Greenland about 800 miles from the North Pole, where one night the mammoth radar antennas watching for the Russian missile invasion over the pole, spotted what we thought was just that. Turns out our radar signals were bouncing off the moon and coming back to us.

Doesn't get much cooler than that.

There were National Security Agency guys up there, and then in Kaiserslautern, Germany (Ramstein AFB) where we built the largest cryptographic center in the world in what had been a Nazi bunker were more CIA and NSA guys running around, and I was hooked.

During a joint forces exercise I got to meet GIs from Germany, Great Britain, France, Turkey, Australia. We drank lots of beer, swapped ethnic jokes, and had those boozey serious late night discussions about the state of the world. Remember we were staring down the barrel of global thermonuclear war and 'Nam was just beginning to heat up. Those were interesting, personality-forming times.

So The Cabal is just a continuing tale for me, of geo-political intrigue, with today's issues plus the evolution of me and my main characters

--How about villains in thriller novels?

It's the bad guy or gal who drives the action in a thriller. Without the villain, there'd be nothing for the heroes do. Clarice Starling only reacted to what Hannibal Lecter told her, and in the end what Buffalo Bill tried to do to her. Otherwise she would have remained at Quantico, just a young trainee.

That said, you'd damn well better know your villains. Who they are, what they want, how they see the outcomes of their actions, what they get out of things. What do they love--who loves them? So you need to build believable villains—so believable that in the end they become memorable.

To create characters like that is actually easier than you think. But you gotta think.

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