Hot off the press

Pat Broderick's debut novel, *Dead on My Feet*, was officially published yesterday (June 15, 2021). It is a cozy mystery set in a community that bears a suspicious resemblance to La Jolla, California. The main character is an obit writer at a weekly newspaper whose colleagues and acquaintances put the quirk in quirky. Rich people! The SoCal coast! Great characters! Murder! I've used up my exclamation point allotment for the year! Pat is now a published author, and jcannonbooks, which provided early editing and guidance, is among the many who are proud of her.

You can buy a hardcover or paperback from CamCat Publishing or Bookshop, or a paperback from Books-a-Million. You can buy a hardcover or paperback from your favorite independent bookseller listed on IndieBound. You can get a hardcover, paperback, or Kindle version from Amazon. Hardcover, paperback, and Nook book versions are available from Barnes & Noble.

Let the reading begin!

Pat Broderick. (Photo by Becky Huard)

Wish I'd written that

When Luann Z., friend since college and subscriber to this newsletter, recommended that I read Leif Enger's books, I knew I would not be disappointed. She is right again.

I am indebted to Luann for many things, including author suggestions. It is unlikely I will ever be able to tell Leif Enger how good his books are. He lives in Minnesota, which I understand is somewhere in the upper Midwest. I usually don't write to authors whose books I have admired to tell them I am a fan (but see exception below regarding Timothy Hallinan). Leif Enger likely travels in rarified literary circles. My travel has been limited to Home Depot and, when I'm feeling adventurous, Costco.

But authors deserve to hear more about the effect of their work. Not from the reviews of uncertain origin posted on Goodreads or Amazon. I mean from readers who become so absorbed that sentences from the book dance through their heads for days or weeks. So while Leif Enger will not read this, the least I can do is tell you about his words so you can enjoy them. And since Leif Enger only writes a book every eight or ten years, you have time to catch up. His debut, *Peace like a River*, was also a beauty.

His latest, *Virgil Wander*, is a fable, love story, mystery, and comic adventure. It is literary, although not in the modern connotation of big words and incomprehensible plots that appeal only to professional critics. It is so gracefully written that you will read slowly to appreciate it.

To entice you toward *Virgil Wander*, a book so sure of itself that even the title is a thematic element, I give you these bits of writing from the novel. It is a collection of sentences that I wish I had written.

Page 55: It's never been hard for me to fall in love, a quality that has yet to simplify one single day in my life.

Page 95: What I had was the doltish conviction that romance finally wins.

Page 112: He asked whether language was returning, and I said yes but slowly. Seeing my frustration, he said if a person were to lose any grammar then let it be adjectives. You could get by minus adjectives. In fact you appeared more decisive without them.

Page 234: I knew he used to call the old man Saturday mornings to talk baseball or politics, trying to keep him from sinking into the marsh of incurious disapproval that swallows so many ancients.

Page 267: His sadness seemed complete. It had left him nothing, no proper enjoyment, no Saturday mornings. Sadness wore him like a tailored suit.

Thanks, Leif Enger. Thanks, Luann.

WORD CHASE:

How author Timothy Hallinan makes a book happen

This interview is also on my blog, Take My Word for It, where you also get a photo. Click here to read it there.

Stringing 80,000 words into a novel is a lonely pursuit.

It's just you wrestling with ideas that flit in and out of your head, characters who won't cooperate, and plots that lead to dead ends. Readers are such a

demanding bunch. They want dramatic tension, approaches to human foibles that they had not previously considered, and inspiration. They even want the book to be interesting. The nerve of some people.

Although writers work in isolation, they share the experience with every other sentence maker. As they hunch over laptops in unhealthful positions, writers are alone together.

If you find yourself tap-tapping on a keyboard in some desolate spot, trapped in a plot device of your own making, soothe yourself with the understanding that others who have been in that place emerged to rejoin humanity. Some of those escapees are so generous that they explain how they did it.

To help you understand how successful writers approach their art, I offer this interview with Tim Hallinan, published author of two dozen books; nominee for the Edgar, Macavity, and Shamus awards; and winner of the Lefty award for best comic crime novel. I have never met Tim, who lives part of the year in Southern California and part in Southeast Asia. It is not my habit to ask people I don't know for the sort of favor he granted me, but I did it anyway. I have mentioned before in this space that I have a particular fondness for Tim's Junior Bender series, and if you are looking for a genre-bending book that combines inventiveness with insight into publishing, grab a copy of *Pulped*. Tim has a deep concern for authors, as you will notice if you visit timothyhallinan.com, a site that contains loads of valuable information on writing and publishing.

Here then is a glimpse into how he works:

Q: When you're deep into writing a book, how many hours in an average day do you spend working on it?

A: That usually depends on where I am in the story, or what kind of trouble I'm in. Usually, at the very beginning, I can work four or five hours at a stretch because I'm finding my way into the story, saying hi to the characters who seem to live there, and beginning to get the lie of the land, and I haven't made any mistakes at that stage—or, at least, none I'm aware of yet. Endings are reasonably easy because they're always new and fresh to me since I almost never know what they'll be until I'm about 70 percent of the way through. So that leaves me with what I think of as The Dread Middle. I believe that new writers are more likely to abandon a book somewhere in the middle than anywhere else.

Incidentally, plotting is pretty much the sole topic of *Making Story: Twenty-one Writers on How They Plot*, a book I edited that's available as an ebook or a

paperback on Amazon. The writers include Brett Battles, Cara Black, Bill Crider, Jeremy Duns, Leighton Gage, Gar Anthony Haywood, Wendy Hornsby, Zoe Sharp, Jeffrey Siger, Kelli Stanley, and a bunch of other really solid writers. Among them, they cover a lot of good material about getting a story rolling to the point at which the novelist can sort of jump on board and let the story carry him or her for a while. This isn't as crass a plug as it might seem because I've gotten hundreds of letters from writers who find it useful.

Q: Can you do other things when writing a book? I don't mean chewing gum or ordering takeout, I mean writing other things.

A: I can't control the timing of arrival of ideas for other books, and if one seems solid, I might put aside what I'm writing for a few hours a day to sort of free-associate on the keyboard about the new one because I think it's a good idea to put something on paper while the pistons are still pumping away, or whatever it is that pistons do. At any time, I have four or five half-baked (or, at any rate, half-cooked) notions for a future book. People who write series are, I think, more susceptible to this distraction than people who write one-offs because you're already thinking about your series character, and something in the current book can easily trigger an idea for a new one. Although I have to say that the book I'm writing right now, which has absolutely zero to do with anything I've ever written, nagged at me for months as I was finishing the next Junior Bender, which is tentatively called *Rim Shot*.

By the way, I think of writing a novel as the creative equivalent of running a marathon. When I was in college, my graduate advisor in English used to listen to me complain about even the notion of writing a novel. I hadn't written any long-form fiction then, but I was thinking about it. He used to say, "Hallinan, five centuries before Christ, Hippocrates used to tell his students, 'Life is short but art is long,'" and he'd also tell me to relax because this was probably the only time in my life that my book—which was, of course, unwritten—would be perfect. Every book is perfect until the first sentence is written.

Q: Is it harder to write a book that is part of a series or a book that stands alone?

A: I've never published a book that wasn't part of a series, although the very first book in any series more or less qualifies as a one-off because all the characters are as new to me as they are to the reader. I'm discovering them as I write. Each one of them is as new and unknown to me as he/she will be to the reader. In that sense, they were all mortal; any and all of them could have been thrown to the wolves if that's where the plot took me. Even if they became important to the story, they were all vulnerable to the plot: it could have been hi

and goodbye. So from that perspective, any one of them could have been in a one-off.

At the same time—even though I was free to dump some or all of these characters into the meat grinder if that was where the story took me—in the back of my mind I was 90 percent certain that some of these folks (even some of the minor ones we met in passing) were either (a) too interesting or (b) too useful, or (c) too much fun to write for me to kiss them off after only one book. (To me, one of the great things about writing a series is watching the supporting characters emerge more fully over the course of several books.) So that meant that even if I knew some fascinating things about the second-tier characters, I would have to sit on some or all that until I wrote the later books

To boil this down: In a one-off you can play the short game and just use the hell out of everyone who occurs to you and everything that's interesting about them. In a series, you play a long game; you try to build a little vault for material that might prove eventually to be the center of a later book in the series. And, of course, you have to do this without diluting or slowing down the story of the book you're writing. It's a little like being on a diet, an experience with which I'm very familiar: You turn your back on some things you'd like to do right now in the interest of being in better shape later.

About half the time, the most difficult book I've ever written is the one I'm writing at the moment, and that's certainly true of the new one, tentatively titled *All Singing, All Dancing*, the story of an unworldly 19-year-old girl from a small town in Minnesota who runs away to Hollywood to become a star. It is the first time I've written a female leading character. My books are full of women and girls, but until now they've mostly been presented as they're experienced, or in some cases loved, by a male character. In the new book, which might not even be a mystery in the traditional sense, almost all the main characters are women and, to make things even harder, it takes place in 1932. I rarely get through a paragraph without having to look something up. But it feels really good to write it most of the time.

Q: Do you have inspiration tricks? A place or music or something that might light a spark when all the tinder seems wet?

A: For years, I wrote while listening to music, everything from rock to classical. The energy sort of floated me along, and sometimes, if I chose correctly, it made a real contribution to the action. In the fourth of my Bangkok novels, *The Queen of Patpong*, a female character has leapt overboard in the dead of night near a small island to escape an absolute lunatic who clearly intends to kill her. I wrote virtually the whole thing to Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*,

which is full of menace and dark water. Now, though, for some reason, I just sit down and write. I always figure that the less I want to write, the more I need to. Kind of a Puritan outlook, but it works for me.

Also, I never forget what a privilege it is that this is my actual job, as opposed to bagging groceries or selling shoes.

Q: Athletes talk about it and sometimes writers do, too. Have you ever entered a zone while writing when it seemed like every sentence was worthy and nothing could distract you?

A: My personal metaphor for my writing process is mining for gold. You spend a lot of time stumbling around in the dark shoveling dreck right and left, and then you strike a vein of gold. When that happens, I write until my fingers fall off because it's an enchanted zone in which the words and feelings are right there in front of me and I don't even have to think about the sentences, much less the paragraphs. I've learned the hard way that sometimes I write garbage in these periods of enchantment, but most of what gets all the way to the page is pretty good or, at the least, fixable. And, since I am emphatically not a plotter, these sessions also often present me with the next thirty-forty pages worth of story, and sometimes even an ending, although I usually go through two or three endings (in my mind) before I find the one that most fittingly closes the door on the story.

Q: Do you have a routine for self-editing?

A: It's built in to my process, if I can use such a grand word. Every day I begin by backing up forty or fifty pages and going over it, making changes as they occur to me. Not only is this a nice way to get some rewriting done, but it also guarantees that I'm in the story when I finally get to the blank page. I also use what I think of as my rhubarb trick. I feel about rhubarb the same way many people feel about large, hairy spiders. Whenever I feel the impulse, I can always back up to page one, do a search for rhubarb and there I am, face to face with a zit on the page. Much of the time I can deal with them then, but some rhubarb patches remain in place or most of the way through the process.

Then, when I've finished, I put it away for a couple of weeks before I give it another look, to let the garbage float to the surface. And the last thing I do is read it aloud to my endlessly patient wife, Munyin. That process can result in dozens, or even hundreds, of fixes and—fortunately, not too often—the discovery of an architectural problem that needs serious attention.

Q: Do you have trustworthy early readers for your manuscripts, and how did

you find them?

A: I have several, and they found me, usually by writing me a letter that demonstrated decisively that they were smarter than I am because they had found something that I not only missed but that had survived the entire editing process. And they'd been nice about it. I also have access to a professional editor who's a friend and who accepts a shamefully small amount of money to go through a manuscript to look for duds and mismatches and omissions and repetitions and internal contradictions and, you know, general screw-ups. And I am blessed at Soho Press by a remarkable editor who can not only sweep up little mistakes but can take the 5,000-foot view to locate internal contradictions and even things that clash with events that happened in previous stories in the series.

Q: Was there something that you did not expect about the journey from writer to published author?

A: I never actually thought I'd be published at all. And I also never expected to be so fond of the people I work with as I have been in my relationships with my family at Soho.

But I want to say, since you raised the notion of publication, that I think writing itself is the best reason for writing. We should also do it as an adventure, as a rigorous mental exercise, as an unendingly interesting process, and an unequaled path of self-exploration, and as the best thrill ride outside of Disneyland. I'd keep writing even if I were no longer being published—which, by the way, is something I've never learned to take for granted. In the end, many of us write in order to write. And thanks for the great questions—sorry I went on for so long.

Kind regards,
jcannonbooks

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