



Home but away: Meltzer, a former Washingtonian, at his house in Fort Lauderdale, modeled after a 1918 Chevy Chase original.

## BEYOND THE VALLEY OF THE NERDS

From his Florida home, bestselling novelist Brad Meltzer concocts heroic tales of clerks and midlevel bureaucrats

BY PATRICK ROGERS

**I**f you stop to look, you'll see a lot of buildings in DC that do nothing. Safe houses—I used to keep a list of them," says Brad Meltzer, casually, over lunch. In the course of researching his political thrillers, he has also crawled through ventilation tunnels beneath the US Capitol; has seen the side entrance at the Lincoln Memorial, reserved for Presidents; and staked out one of those safe houses, where Israelis and Palestinians once met clandestinely.

For a DC fanboy like Meltzer—author of ten novels, all set in what purports to be a malevolent underside of the capital—the biggest score is still the upper floors of the White House. "The residence is the coolest, definitely," says Meltzer, 45, with glasses

framing his clean-shaven head. During the George W. Bush administration, he was invited to a luncheon in the family dining room, where he sat next to the President's mother. "I was looking at my place card thinking, 'I'm going to steal this,'" he recalls, "when Barbara Bush leaned over and said, 'All the novices, of course, want to steal their card.' I was like, 'Oh, yes, all the novices.' Then I was like, 'Oh, look! Ruth Bader Ginsburg!' I swiped my card as fast as I could."

It's fitting. Meltzer's thrillers make action heroes out of the Beltway's legion of novices—that great majority of locals who aren't so world-weary that they wouldn't want to hang onto a presidential souvenir, the ones who relish morsels of inside-Washington trivia. And like his characters, Meltzer is a DC nerd's

nerd, a student-council guy who fell hard for the Capital of the Free World but whose workaday professional experience here was never exciting enough to turn into thrills.

His books are to Washington what Dan Brown's *Angels & Demons* is to the Vatican: a manipulation of a city's history and architectural details to produce gothic conspiracies that test—and sometimes trample right over—the limits of belief, and manage to sell in tons.

His latest, *The President's Shadow*, out this month, involves a psychopath bent on harming the President, the modern-day remnants of a gang of spies founded by George Washington, and a severed limb dug up in the White House rose garden. Obscure tidbits of history are deposited into the serpentine plot like a trail of Milk-Bones left for the faithful. We learn that, while in office, at least one President sometimes carried a concealed weapon and that Dr. Seuss drew propaganda posters for the US during World War II. John le Carré Meltzer ain't.

But he also imbues his characters with something more ineffably Washington: a mix of innocent wonder about the wheels of government and relentless ambition. Embodied in the hero of his first novel—a newbie Supreme Court clerk named Ben Addison in 1997's *The Tenth Justice*—the trait runs through many of his books, attracting readers who, you suspect, might once have fallen victim to this headiness themselves. Meltzer has fan letters from Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush, who told *USA Today* in 2011, "He is a master storyteller who keeps all of us on the edge of our seats."

**SO IT MIGHT COME AS A SURPRISE TO** learn that Meltzer does not, in fact, live in Washington. He moved away a decade ago, after a stint in town as a speechwriter for AmeriCorps. "You certainly expect him to live in DC," says his friend the writer A.J. Jacobs, "or some center of conspiracy."

Instead, Meltzer lives in Fort Lauderdale with his wife, Cori, an attorney, and their three children, close to Cori's aging parents in Miami. (His parents, who also lived nearby, are deceased.) "Thank God we moved [back to Florida]," says Meltzer. "I would have Jewish guilt to this moment."

On the other hand, it's fair to say he's never left Washington. Before returning south, the couple shopped hard to find a neighborhood with tall, leafy trees that lend it a Mid-Atlantic feel. Then they built a house that pays

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROLANDO DIAZ

deep homage to their former 1918 Colonial on Underwood Street in Chevy Chase, with a similar layout and sparing no detail that would make Broward County feel more like Montgomery County.

When we went to lunch in Boca Raton, Meltzer proudly drove me to the local outpost of Uncle Julio's, a Mexican chain he first patronized in Bethesda.

His house lacks only a basement. "They don't exist in Florida," Meltzer says. Basements matter in his world—they're dark and harbor secrets. "So we had the contractor build a secret room," he says, leading me to an ordinary-looking closet door. We climb up a staircase to a hideaway where he spends several hours a day plaiting the intricate plots of his mysteries and refreshing his social-media accounts. (Recent Facebook update: "If you email me really early, or really late, or really at all, I assume you're pooping.")

The work he does up there has lately included some high-profile projects: writing the scripts for comic books (for DC Comics, fittingly) and working on graphic novels for Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

series. Meltzer has a line of biographies aimed at children, celebrating "heroes"—Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, and (out this summer) Lucille Ball.

But his sidelines still have a Washington thrust—or at least the sort you'd have if you were an expat with a big crush on the capital.

## "DC is a secret clubhouse for student-government presidents."

In 2010 and 2011, he hosted two seasons of a documentary TV show, *Decoded*, which tackled unsolved historical mysteries. Last year, his History Channel show, *Lost History*, authenticated, or myth-busted, items such as a pistol purportedly used by John Wilkes Booth to assassinate President Lincoln. Earlier, he co-created the WB series *Jack &*

*Bobby*, about a pair of teenage brothers, one of whom will grow up to be President.

**BORN IN BROOKLYN, MELTZER HAD HIS** first experience of Washington in 1983, at a pretty grim moment in his young life. His father, a hot-tempered son of a Russian immigrant who had already blown through a series of jobs, mostly in the garment trade, had been fired again, this time from a greeting-card store in New York's Penn Station. "When you come home from school and your dad's there at 3:30, you know something's wrong," says Meltzer, who was 13. The family packed up and moved to Florida with \$1,200 in savings.

Among their belongings were two bottles of Champagne his parents had bought to uncork at the weddings of their two children—Brad and his younger sister, Bari—which Meltzer says he can still hear clanking in the back of their Dodge Aspen all the way down I-95.

He managed to persuade his dad to pull off the highway in the nation's capital long enough to take snapshots of the landmarks with his Kodak disc camera. "It was run, take a picture, goodbye, in the course of the half

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hour,” he says. But the impression was lasting. “Listen, DC is always a secret clubhouse for the student-government presidents around the country,” says Meltzer.

He wanted in. And like so many before him, Meltzer—who went on to lead the student body at North Miami Beach Senior High—arrived with the best of ambitions: “I wanted to be there for the same reasons every other nerdy student wants to be there. Because we really believed the only way to change the world was to be in that city.”

After freshman year at the University of Michigan, Brad and Cori, his girlfriend since ninth grade, landed summer internships in Washington. Meltzer’s was at the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Backstage work on a committee can be soporific, and interns aren’t exactly a big draw on DC’s social circuit. Which is to say that, unlike the superannuated spies and journalists who turn their professional lives into literary material, Meltzer didn’t have much to mine.

But he was already being drawn to fantastic superheroes whose special powers could change the world in their way. They were also armed with a moral certainty not provided by a father more prone to making public scenes and losing jobs. It was 1989, the year of the first Tim Burton/Michael Keaton Batman movie. Meltzer, a die-hard fan, convinced his future father-in-law to put up the cash for a thousand Batman T-shirts to sell as souvenirs at a stand inside an M Street cinema. Meltzer succeeded only by spending most of the rest of his internship combing through the Yellow Pages in a vacant Dirksen Building office, digging up retail customers to make up for lackluster street sales.

His place in the superhero world has since become more secure. Besides writing for DC’s Green Arrow series, he won a 2008 Eisner Award (the Oscar of the comics world) for his work on the Justice League of America. One of his proudest and most humbling moments, he once told an interviewer, was typing the letters S-U-P-E-R-M-A-N for the first time knowing he was being paid to do so.

**MELTZER BEGAN WRITING IN EARNEST** while studying law at Columbia University. “I only went to law school out of fear,” he says. He returned to DC in 1994 to work for AmeriCorps—the oath of service he cowrote is still recited by new AmeriCorps members today, ending with the plain but elegant call to action “I will get things



**Fanman:** Meltzer, with future wife Cori, top, sells Batman tees at the K-B Fine Arts cinema on M Street in 1989. Above, at the National Archives sleepover last year. At right, two comics side projects.

done”—but his plans had already moved on from being a player in politics to being a chronicler of clerks and supernumeraries.

While Washington bestsellers like David Baldacci and Tom Clancy make heroes of Army investigators and covert agents who rise to the presidency, Meltzer puts functionaries in unaccustomed situations.

## “The most important part of Superman is not Superman—it’s Clark Kent.”

“The most important part of Superman is not Superman—it’s Clark Kent,” he says, “because we all know what it’s like to be boring and ordinary and wish we could do something incredibly beyond ourselves. That’s what everything I write is about. It took seven books to realize it, but that’s my story.”

“Brad had an understanding of young

Washington, the interns and assistants who would eventually run the show but who were still young and inexperienced enough to make some serious mistakes,” says Rob Weisbach, who published *The Tenth Justice* under his imprint at William Morrow. The book jumped into the top ten on the *New York Times* bestseller list within a week.

Since then, two more of Meltzer’s novels, *The Book of Fate* in 2006 and *The Inner Circle* in 2011, have made it to first place on that list. And like his latest, they follow the exploits of an archivist at the National Archives named Beecher White. He’s a James Bond in the guise of a midlevel bureaucrat—“overeducated and a little bit self-obsessed, like myself,” says the author. White is proud to be doing the nation’s work, yet occasionally aggrieved to find himself so close to the source of power without ever getting to plunge his hands in.

“I tend not to write about Presidents,” says Meltzer. “I care more about the guy who brings him the pen to sign the bill. That’s how I saw DC when I came, and that’s how I see it today. I’m never going to be sitting in the Oval, but I know I have a really good view.”

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PHOTOGRAPHS OF MELTZER WITH WIFE AND AT ARCHIVES COURTESY OF MELTZER FAMILY