

Q & A

Author John Schlarbaum

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1. When did you begin to experiment with writing?

Growing up I was more of a reader, than a writer, although I did write a few short stories in my teens. My creative writing interests escalated during a Television Broadcast course at Mohawk College. There I became more involved in writing class projects, than operating a camera or other technical equipment. After graduation I worked for several years on different television programs, usually behind the scenes as a writer or researcher. Outside of work, I wrote two short stories as gifts, one for my father and the other for my best friend's wedding. In later years, *The Doctor's Bag* and *Aging Gracefully Together* would be the first books I published, which established me as an author to the public. I then followed these publications with my mystery series novels.

2. What steps did you take to get your work published?

I sent the above two stories to various literary agents and publishing companies with no success. I then decided to try self publishing them, thereby maintaining control of every aspect of the process. I purchased a 'self publishing in Canada' book and began to check off the needed requirements chapter by chapter. Two graphic designer friends offered to create the cover and helped with the layout of the book. Once completed, I had copies of the books printed and entered into consignment agreements with area gift and book stores, including Chapters. To promote the books, I would then do periodic signing events at each location. I have followed this approach with my subsequent novels, expanding my fan base by participating in numerous arts and crafts shows throughout the year.

3. Which types of writing are you most successful with/enjoy most? (i.e. novels, plays, poems, non-fiction, etc.)

I enjoy writing mysteries the most for the challenge of keeping people guessing until the final pages. Also, the storylines can encompass different genres within their pages (romance, thriller etc.) that allow me to branch out as a writer.

4. What inspired you to move from novels to plays?

My current involvement with writing interactive mystery plays began when a friend attended one such event and determined I could do a much better job. This led to the idea of writing a historic themed story to be part of the War of 1812 celebrations in Amherstburg. With that event

a success, I was asked to write a second one, with a third one to be performed in September 2014. The advantage to me is that I create the characters, their backgrounds and possible motives, but the actors fill in the blanks when asked questions by the amateur detectives. I make sure they have all the clues needed to be brought forth, which they can do at their own pace during the play.

My novella *Aging Gracefully Together* began in play form – three one-act set pieces consisting of a couple talking to each other about something that happened on that day. For my best friend's wedding gift, I expanded these unrelated stories into book form and added two more conversations to flesh out the storyline. The result was following one couple through their 50 years together, with each chapter highlighting one event on one day at different stages of their life (i.e. Chapter One – 19 years old; Chapter Two – 25 years old; Chapter Three – 42 years old). It is my goal to convert this story back into play form to be performed on the stage.

5. I noticed that in the article, "Amherstburg author takes murder mystery writing skills on the road," you said that, "[you] make sure each case is solvable, sprinkling clues about the guilty culprit through the accounts of other cast members." What steps do you take in your writing process to accomplish this?

For the plays: I first come up with the actual mystery (dead body found in the kitchen / missing diary / stolen item). It is then a matter of mentally stepping back from the crime scene to determine who the culprit(s) are, then back a bit further to figure out why they did it, followed by how they physically arrived at this point. Once I can picture the scene in my mind and the logistics of the crime, I can then populate the rest of the story with other characters, their interactions with the culprit(s) and also give some of them motives for wanting to commit the same crime! As I write each individual character, they obviously intermingle with other players and it's just a matter of making sure each knows about the other, in order to accurately answer the detective's inquiries. In my mind, I write the plays in the same way I do my full-length novels: to be fair to the audience the crime must be solvable. When I determine who the criminal(s) will be I make sure there are at least five distinct aspects of the crime only they would have knowledge of. Others may have motives and means, but just as in real life, in the end the evidence is stacked toward this particular character(s).

For the novels: I usually know how a mystery will begin and have a vague plan how it'll be resolved, but no concrete ideas about the characters who will inhabit the story (aside from the main ones – Steve Cassidy / Jennifer Malone). I find each new day brings out new clues for my investigators to pursue and I come up with suitable people for them to speak with. Sometimes these people are never heard from again, while others take on a life of their own and become integral characters in helping to solve the mystery.

6. Obviously your work as a private investigator strongly influences your writing. Have you ever experimented/thought about experimenting with different genres in writing, or is murder mystery your true passion?

At this stage, I think mysteries are my true calling. The two short story books are more inspirational, written with specific people in mind. As I mentioned previously, I can still write characters and sub-plots with the same type of sentimentality without taking away from the mystery.

Currently, I am updating my very first novel I wrote in 1991 titled *Lasting Impressions*, a psychological thriller about a drifter that visits a small town and trouble ensues. At the time I was reading these types of novels written by Stephen King and Clive Barker. I'm using the lessons I've learned from my recent novels to raise the level of writing that I didn't possess when I was 27 years old (i.e. pacing, character development). It's an interesting process, as I've lived with this story for 23 years. By taking a break before writing the second Jennifer Malone Mystery, I hope my fans will enjoy something a bit different, especially with the continued popularity of King books, as well as the likes of Dean Koontz. I'm sure if given the time I could write another thriller, but will stay within the mystery genre for now.

7. When did you realize your dream to become an author? How long did it take for that desire to turn into a reality?

I have been fortunate that from the start my books have been well reviewed and liked by the public. Although on a much small scale than a writer signed with a major publishing house, I consider myself quite successful as a self-published author. I attribute much of this accomplishment to constantly promoting the books at various shows, signing events and sending out a monthly newsletter.

8. What are some important lessons you've learned since becoming an accomplished author?

The biggest lesson I've learned is upon finishing a new book to keep all your options open. I print off 10-15 preview copies and give them to family, friends, librarians, school teachers and fans, to get their honest feedback. When returned, I take into consideration any and all suggestions given to improve the storyline or strengthen a character's development. Many times a reader has questions about a scene, which can be fixed with the addition of a new line or two. Also, the story may be enhanced by simplifying the plot (i.e. too much unneeded information about a character or motive), as long as it doesn't take away from the overall storyline. The first version of *Lasting Impressions* contained an unbelievable approximately 150,000 words. The version I'm working on today contains about 101,000 words and the story is 90% improved! In most cases, less is more, if done correctly.

9. What are some recommendations you would give to someone wishing to become a writer?

Be true to what interests you. Personally, the old adage “write what you know” is good advice. I’m comfortable using my experiences as a private investigator and growing up in a small town to give my work an authentic feel. For example, I wouldn’t be as secure writing a Science Fiction book, as I don’t have a good point of reference to do a credible job.

10. What are your goals for your writing in the future?

I want to continue writing both mystery series, as well as adapting *Aging Gracefully Together* for the stage. Like any writer, I’m always hoping for a way to bring my work to a bigger audience (i.e. movies, TV).

11. How many people does writing and publishing a book involve? How much of an influence do you believe these people have on the success of your writing?

In my case, I now have a credible stable of about 15 people that I can share my work with and trust their advice. Many of these individuals also proof-read the text to make sure it’s grammatically correct, which I greatly appreciate! The cover and book layout design consists of 1-2 graphic designers. The promotion and marketing areas are still basically me, myself and I – a part of the business many self-publishers fail to do, resulting in very low sales.

12. How do you feel about the responses you've received to your writing?

I am very grateful of the readers who take time to post a review on a website or send one to me personally. The majority of these are complimentary of my writing style, the characters or the storyline, however, I do receive the odd negative review. I send a personal reply back to each reviewer thanking them for their comments.