

SECRETS FOR **REVISING AND EDITING YOUR WORK**

Writer's Digest

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT **SELF-PUBLISHING**

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- UNDERSTAND THE PROS AND CONS
- BREAK OUT FROM THE PACK
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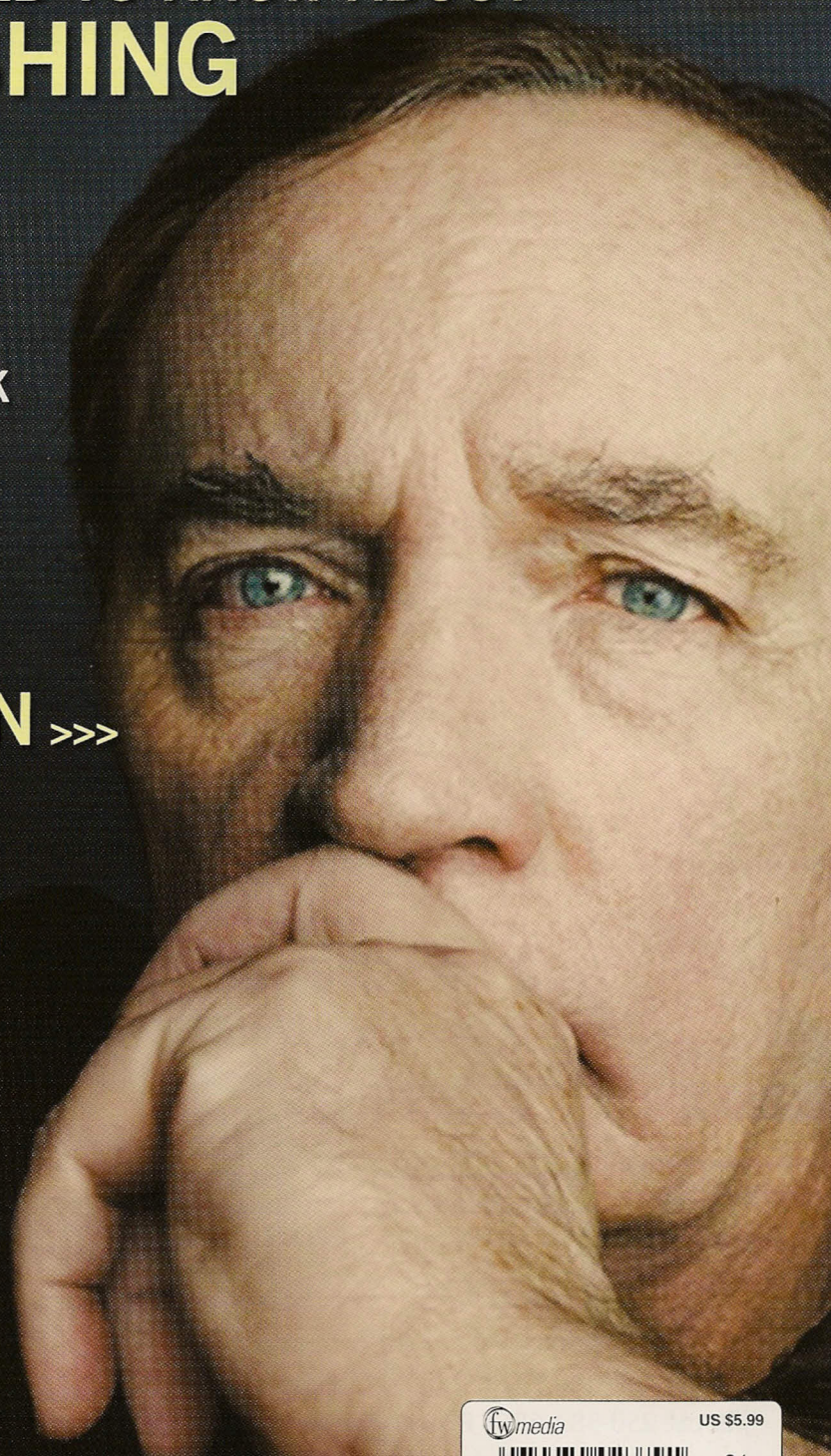
THE WD INTERVIEW: **JAMES PATTERSON >>>**

On His Prolific Brand of Success

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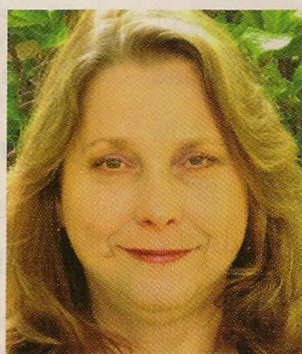


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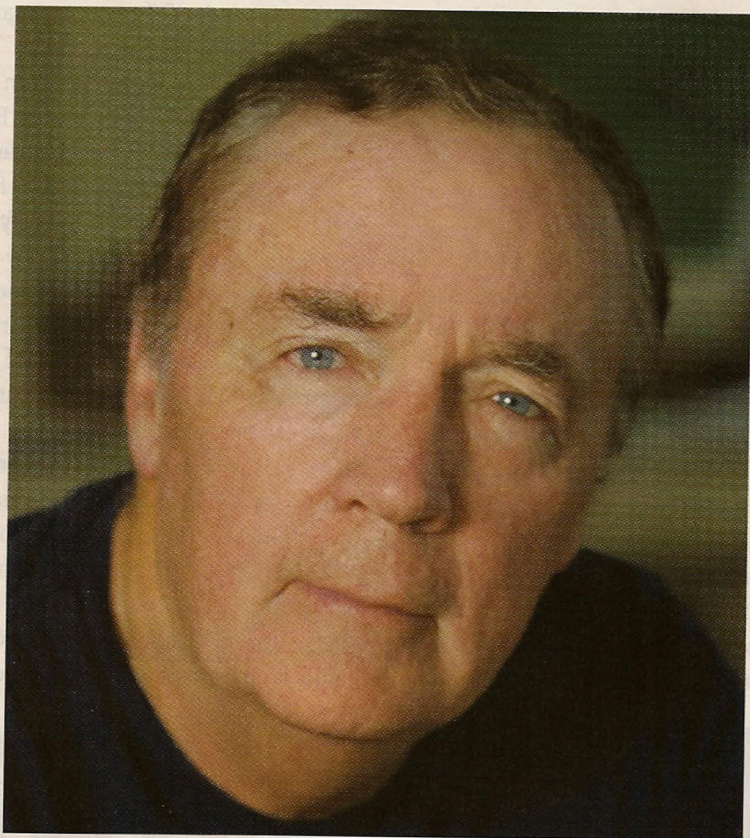
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THE WD INTERVIEW: JAMES PATTERSON



TRADEMARK SUCCESS

TO A BESTSELLING AUTHOR, THE WORDS "BRAND" AND "FACTORY" MIGHT NOT SOUND LIKE TERMS OF ENDEARMENT. BUT JAMES PATTERSON HAS MORE STORIES TO TELL—AND 100 MILLION READERS BEHIND HIM TO HELP SOFTEN THE BLOW.

by Diana Page Jordan

PHOTO © KELLY CAMPBELL

More than 100 million people have read at least one James Patterson book. That's roughly one out of every three U.S. citizens. Last fall, with the publication of *Against Medical Advice*, his first work of narrative nonfiction, Patterson became the first author to have debuted at No. 1 on five *New York Times* bestseller lists: Hardcover Fiction, Hardcover Nonfiction, Mass Market Fiction, Children's Chapter Books and Children's Series. He also holds *The New York Times* bestsellers record at 42, according to his publisher.

It all began in 1977 when Patterson's debut novel, *The Thomas Berryman Number*, won an Edgar Award. His breakout hit was *Along Came a Spider*, the first of many novels featuring Deputy Chief of Detectives Alex Cross. Today, his prolific body of work spans multiple genres, including The Women's Murder Club series (a natural, he says, since he grew up surrounded by women), the Detective Michael Bennett books (co-authored with Michael Ledwidge), two young-adult series (Daniel X and Maximum Ride), the occasional historical novel (such as *The Jester*, which he calls "history on adrenalin") and even romance (including *Suzanne's Diary for Nicholas*, one of his favorites). He maintains this high volume, in part, by working with co-authors—a practice frowned upon by some, but rebutted by Patterson in one word: "teamwork."

His name is so well known that he's even been the subject of a "brand" case study by Harvard Business School students. Yet he says the secret to his success isn't the marketing, though he's a former ad executive who's sold more than 150 million books worldwide. Patterson says his books sell by the millions whatever the genre because they're cinematic, they're fast paced and, well, they're good.

HOW HAVE YOU BUILT YOUR NAME TO BE SUCH A WIDELY RECOGNIZED BRAND?

For me it's always been the same, and this was true when I was in business. I've always concentrated on the product. There are very few cases where people or enterprises or franchises have succeeded unless the product is really good for that audience. [Writers] always want to hear it's the advertising. It isn't—it's the product.

SO HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT MAKING YOUR MATERIAL SO INTERESTING?

I'm big on having a blistering pace. That's one of the hallmarks of what I do, and that's not easy. I never blow up cars and things like that, so it's something else that keeps the suspense flowing. I try not to write a chapter that isn't going to turn on the movie projector in your head.

My style is colloquial storytelling. It's the way we tell stories to one another—it's not writerly, it's not overdone. In the colloquial style, when you're just telling a story to somebody—and if [you said] some of the stuff that a lot of people put into books—somebody would just say, "Will you please get to the point?" Or, "This story is putting me

to sleep." Or, "Could I move to sit next to somebody else at this dinner?" A lot of writers fall in love with their sentences or their construction of sentences, and sometimes that's great, but not everybody is Gabriel García Márquez or James Joyce. A lot of people like to pretend that they are, and they wind up not giving people a good read or enlightening them.

HOW DOES YOUR BACKGROUND IN ADVERTISING PLAY INTO YOUR SUCCESS?

What advertising helped me to understand and get into my head very powerfully is that there is an audi-

ence out there. People go in and they think they know all the answers, and then they test stuff and find out that nobody paid attention, nobody cared; it was a blip on the screen. So you learn that there is an audience there. I'm always pretending that I'm sitting across from somebody. I'm telling them a story, and I don't want them to get up until it's finished. I'm very conscious of an audience. I'm very conscious that I'm an entertainer. Something like 73 percent of my readers are college graduates, so you can't condescend to people. You've got to tell them a story that they will be willing to pay money to read.

YOU'RE APPARENTLY THE FIRST AUTHOR TO BE A CASE STUDY FOR FUTURE CEOS AT HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL.

It was a lot of fun and an honor. Once again, the answer to what's happening here is not one that [business students and writers] want to hear. What I have working for me is

"I want to create a book that I think people are going to enjoy, that I would enjoy, and I get a kick out of that. Some writers don't."

that I'm very emotional and I'm analytical, and that's not always in the same body.

So I can look at my work and I can write it and try to make it as scary or loving or whatever the scene is supposed to be. And I can step back from it and analyze whether I've come anywhere near creating that.

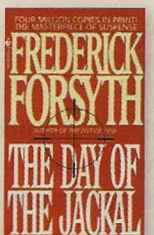
JAMES PATTERSON'S BOOKSHELF



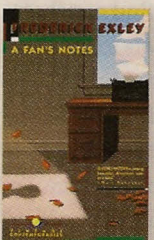
ULYSSES was very important to me because I love that book, and I'm a huge James Joyce fanatic. But the important thing for me about that book was that when I read it, I said, "I could never write anything even close to this." Therefore, trying literary fiction and maybe succeeding in a mediocre way just didn't interest me.



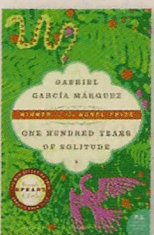
On the other hand, I read *THE EXORCIST* (William Peter Blatty) and *THE DAY OF THE JACKAL* (Frederick Forsyth) and I went, "Boy, these are kind of cool in their own way, and maybe I could do something like this."



A FAN'S NOTES by Frederick Exley was a big turn-on for me. [It was] that kind of autobiographical novel where you just felt that here was a writer struggling with all sorts of demons and being funny about it, and [he was] a wonderful writer, and kind of making it, at least in terms of writing the book.



ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE (Gabriel García Márquez) probably remains my favorite novel. The whole notion of magical realism appeals to me, and it's probably a little bit of a stimulus for me to write the YA stuff where anything goes.



SO WHAT DID THEY TEACH IN THAT HARVARD STUDY?

They were very interested in the notion that I was a brand, in their opinion. And you couldn't talk to a Coca-Cola bottle, but you could talk to me. They wanted to hear what I thought was behind it. I thought a lot of it was the fact that I'm thinking about the reader: I want to create a book that I think people are going to enjoy, that I would enjoy, and I get a kick out of that. Some writers don't. Some serious writers, the last thing in the world they want to do is entertain people, and that's fine, but I do want to entertain people.

On the marketing side, once I've written a book, I want to make sure that the cover is reasonable. And that, within reason, we've stuck our hand up in the air and said, "There's a new book!" which is really all the advertising can do.

YOU'VE BEEN WORKING WITH CO-AUTHORS. HOW AND WHY DID YOU BEGIN DOING THAT?

I just have too many stories. I couldn't possibly do them all. People sometimes get wise-assed about the co-writers, but if you saw what happened ... ! For example, with *Sundays at Tiffany's*, I worked with a co-writer, and then I wrote seven drafts. And that happens a lot.

The "factory" comes up occasionally as a phrase. If it's a factory, it's a factory where everything is hand-tooled. If you came here now, you would see just stack upon stack—manuscript, screenplays, etc.—and almost nothing comes out of here that I don't rewrite a lot, in addition to outlining.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

With the exception of *The Quickie*, every idea has been mine. I come up with the idea. I write an outline, about which one of my agents says, with this outline I could write the book. Usually, with a co-written book, somebody else will do the first draft and I will do subsequent drafts.

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE YOUR CO-AUTHORS?

There are some people I've known for a long time. I've known Maxine Paetro for a long time. Peter De Jonge I've known for a long time—he worked with me at J. Walter Thompson [advertising agency]. Michael Ledwidge was a guy who sent me a manuscript. We had both gone undergraduate to Manhattan College, although a long time apart. He was working as a doorman in New York. At the time I was chairman of J. Walter Thompson, and he gave [his manuscript] to my assistant, and my assistant said, "Jim will look at it." Mike went home that night, and he was with his wife and the phone rang in his apartment, and he made a joke to his wife and said, "It's probably James Patterson." And he picked up the phone and it was me.

I said I liked it, and I helped him get an agent. So he sold it, and six or seven years later, he was having a little trouble, and we talked, and I said, "If you'd like, we can try to write a book together," and we wrote *Step on a Crack*. And then we co-wrote the first Daniel X. We co-wrote *The Quickie*, which was Mike's idea. We [released] another Michael Bennett [series book] in February, *Run for Your Life*. And the next Michael Bennett is finished, and we're doing another one.

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO THOSE WHO CRITICIZE YOU FOR WORKING WITH CO-AUTHORS?

Most movie scripts are teams. Television shows are generally written by teams. In the beginning, a lot of series were written with co-authors. Stephen King has written with co-authors. Who cares? It doesn't matter. Read the book. If you don't like the book, you can talk to me about it. It's not an issue of whether it's written by somebody else or not. In America, we get so caught up in individualism and heroes. I'm big on teams. I think teamwork is great. I couldn't possibly do all these stories. I have a file of stories that's 400 pages thick, and they're stories that I want to tell. Steven Spielberg doesn't go out and do it by himself. I like the co-authored books. I think a lot of them are quite cool.

WHAT WOULD YOU TELL ASPIRING WRITERS?

If it's commercial fiction that you want to write, it's story, story, story. You've got to get a story where if you tell it to somebody in a paragraph, they'll go, "Tell me more." And then when you start to write it, they continue to want to read more. And if you don't, it won't work.

In terms of literary fiction, that's something different. It should be a point of view on something that's wonderful to read. Too often it's just style. I think style can be fine, but I think it's a little overrated if a book is nothing but style. I'm not as keen on it as some people are.

WHAT ARE YOU WRITING NOW, AND IN WHAT GENRES?

I just finished another historical [novel]. I really like this idea. It's a book that Alex Cross has written based on family stories, so you have your main character actually writing a book, and that's really fun and different. Obviously, [I'm also working on] a lot of crime fiction—The Women's Murder Club series, the Alex Cross series, the Michael Bennett series. We also have the TV series we sold to CBS in which Michael Bennett is the main character. Love stories—*Sundays at Tiffany's* was the most recent. *Suzanne's Diary for Nicholas* was earlier, which I really enjoy. They are most challenging for me because nobody gets killed, so I don't have the cop-out of bringing in that kind of suspense and adventure.

One horror: *You've Been Warned. Run for Your Life* will be out. The next Maximum Ride, called *Max*. It's been very successful. I'll go to schools, and you feel like you're a rock star because the whole school has read it and they're just screaming and yelling. In my mind, the best way—or one of the best ways—to get kids reading is to give them books that they love.

I was a very good student, but I didn't particularly like to read when I was younger. I still hate *Silas Marner*. They gave us books that were turnoffs to most of us. And then I worked my way through college at a hospital. I had a lot of free time, and I started reading everything I could find, and it was all serious stuff, but I fell in love. And that passion! You will hear that from a lot of people who do well in things. What's the key? The key is passion, I think. You gotta love it.

IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU'VE GOT ENOUGH PASSION TO LAST FOREVER.

I love it! You're lucky if you find something you love to do, and if somebody will pay you to do it. That's my situation. I think I understand what I do well, and what I don't do as well. I tell stories well. I'm not a terrific stylist. *Thomas Berryman*, the first book I wrote, won an Edgar and does have a fair amount of style. I don't think it's a great story, but it does have style, so I have the ability to do it up to a point, but not as much as I'd want to, to write certain kinds of fiction.

WHAT'S YOUR SECRET TO SUCCESS?

I don't think there are a lot of really readable books out there. There are less than people think there are. There's a lot of stuff that you pick it up and you feel like, "I've read this before." It's very hard to grab people. I don't think it's an accident that I'm up there. I don't think it's an accident that John Grisham is up there. John Grisham grabs people. There are a few writers that do it. I don't think it's that easy, and it's not a question of somebody who writes good sentences. It's a question of people being able to tell stories in a way that captivates a lot of readers.

I'm not trying to duck the marketing thing. My advice to most people, in terms of, what should you do after you write your book? Should you invest in some marketing? Should you stand outside a bookstore with flyers? Go write another book. Go write another book! You learned some things writing this book. Make use of them in the next book, and keep your passion going, and get that habit. [WD]

DIANA PAGE JORDAN (dianapagejordan.com) interviews writers for radio, TV, the Web and print publications. She's a radio and television anchor in Portland, Ore.