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Book: *PAINTING THE INVISIBLE MAN*, The Reed Edwards Company, Fiction/Contemporary Historical Fiction, 2007, ISBN: 978-0-9795347-0-6, U.S. \$14.95

1.) What inspired you to write *Painting the Invisible Man*?

I wasn't inspired as much as I was 'led' to writing this book. Much like the character, Anna, I was researching the archives of my childhood hometown newspaper, *The Syracuse Post-Standard*, when I made a keying error...which led to my discovering 37 articles from the 1990s referencing my father. What captured my attention wasn't so much the number of articles written 25 years after his death, it was one particular headline about the FBI having audio tapes of a mob enforcer talking about a 20-year old murder he got away with...that being the murder of my father.

2.) Describe *Painting the Invisible Man*.

In 2001, while researching the online archives of her hometown newspaper for a client, freelance writer Rita Schiano made a keying error—a simple mistake that led her to a path she'd been avoiding most of her life; on a journey inside the world of her father, killed gangland-style more than two decades ago.



Schiano turned that difficult journey into an engrossing novel. *Painting The Invisible Man* is a poignant, often hilarious coming of age story that explores the complex dynamics of growing up in an Italian family on the fringe of the Mafia.

3.) What themes are explored in your novel?

- PIM is an adult coming of age story. Anna is compelled by twists of fate to explore the truths about her childhood growing up in a family on the fringes of the Mafia.
- The story explores the resilience of children...Anna's unique, yet childlike ways of protecting herself against dangers she subconsciously perceives, yet does not understand.
- Forgiveness – both in being forgiving and in being forgiven. I talk about this when I speak with groups. I tell the part of the story where Anna reads about daily coverage of the trials and realizes how she had not been there for her mother. Like Anna, I broke down crying. What I would have given if I could have picked up the phone and asked my mother for forgiveness. But it was too late. She died in 1986
- Atonement – Making amends for having wronged someone. Anna made amends to Petey and to Greg.
- Redemption – Being saved from the error of one's ways. Anna's awareness that she could have walked a path very similar to that of her father.

4.) Describe your path to becoming a writer?

When I was a child, every Sunday morning my grandmother would rip the list of spelling bee words from the newspaper and my task that week would be to look up the words in the dictionary,



learn their meaning, their pronunciation, how to spell them, and to use them in a sentence during the week. This once dreaded exercise led to my love of words.

My mother also encouraged reading. I had my first library card at age five and my first typewriter, a green Tom Thumb (a gift from Santa), at age six. The cancellation of my favorite television show, *The Girl From U.N.C.L.E.*, when I was ten, drove me to write my own spy adventures featuring April Dancer and Mark Slade.

As an adult in my late 20s-early 30s, I worked as an acquisition editor for a NYC publishing company. Tired of the NYC of the mid-1980s (a city sullied by crack cocaine and horrific homelessness, despite Reagan's assertion he saw no homeless people in NY) I moved to New England and opened an Italian-Japanese restaurant. One of my customers, Ruth Wells, (author of *A to Zen* and *The Farmer And The Poor God*) suggested I take a stab at writing again. She thought the stories of my childhood were interesting and threatened to use them if I did not.

I began writing, short stories at first, and with Ruth's encouragement, I sent them to a quarterly, and had a few published. One short story evolved into my first novel, *Sweet Bitter Love*, which was published by Rising Tide Press in 1997.

Upon selling my restaurant in 2000, I decided to pursue writing as a profession. I now make a living as a freelance writer.

5.) Why did you feel compelled to tell a fictional version of events that are very close to you?

I started to write PIM as a non-fiction, thinking I could take a journalistic approach to exploring my father's murder. I had about 60-70 pages written and I gave them to my partner, Michelle, to



read. I trusted that she would be honest. She was. She told me that the writing was lacking emotion. I had to agree.

I knew fiction would offer me the freedom I needed to explore the story with emotional honesty. And after the *A Million Little Pieces* debacle, I did not want to risk being “Frey-ed.” Since much of the story takes place during my childhood, I knew I would have to re-create scenes and merge memory with imagination to bring some events to life.

I felt, too, the need to protect my family, particularly my brother, John, on whom the Anthony character is based. John was still alive at the time I was writing. He passed away a year after the book was published.

6.) How did revisiting your past through a fictional outlet help you heal?

Writing PIM healed me in more ways than I could have imagined. Prior to writing the story I did not realize how much I needed to forgive and to be forgiven. I needed to forgive my father for so much: putting our family at risk, his mistreatment of my mother, being absent from so much of my life.

In understanding the defense attorney’s role, I was able to heal my relationship with Terri’s husband Jim.

I am truly at peace with myself.

7.) How did you decide what information was crucial to *Painting the Invisible Man*?



I knew that adding so many news articles was a bit risky, especially during the scene at the library when Anna is reading article after article. But I wanted the reader to feel the bombardment of information that Anna was experiencing.

I wrestled with revealing personal aspects of my parents' relationship. It was a difficult call, yet the dialectical nature of their personalities and their personas was compelling.

My strange behavior as a child (the pellet gun in the shoulder holster under her school blazer, the green vest with smoke bombs and L-pills sewn into the seams) revealed how I dealt with my fears...and to demonstrate the resiliency of children.

8.) Do you have any inspiring anecdotes that have come from your writing?

Anecdote # 1: I am sometimes invited to talk with middle school kids about writing. One day I was asked where do I get ideas for stories?

I admitted to the kids that I'm an eavesdropper. I love to sit in coffeehouses, restaurants, on park benches and watch people. I shared that I always carry a notebook and pen so I can write down my observations...the way someone uses his hands—pounding fist against open palm when making a point, or the coy shrug of one shoulder.

A few weeks after my visit I received an e-mail from the teacher. She wrote how several of her students have taken to carrying notebooks and jotting down their observations.

Anecdote # 2: I was at a book signing a few weeks ago and a woman told me about her daughter who likes to write. "Is she here with you?" I asked.

"Yes. She's looking around."

"Please tell her to come by and say hello. What's her name?"



"Amanda."

A few minutes later, a tentative pre-teen was hovering nearby. "You're Amanda, aren't you." I smiled so as not to freak the poor kid out. She nodded shyly. "I understand that you like to write." She nodded again. "Tell me about one of your stories."

That's all it took for her passion for writing to explode out of her. In between signing books and chatting with book buyers, Amanda and I talked about writing dialogue, creating believable characters, and the dreaded writer's block. And then it appeared, the bane of most creative people: self-doubt. "I really hope to have a book published someday," she confided in me. "But I try not to get my hopes up. It probably won't happen."

I reached for one of my promotional postcards featuring the cover of *Painting The Invisible Man*. "Amanda, I want you to keep this postcard right next to your computer. And every time you look at it, I want you to envision that this is your book cover instead. Okay?"

She smiled as she reached for the card. "If you believe that you can get a book published, Amanda, then you will do it. You have to believe in yourself and your talent. And if you can do that, then you will succeed."

Anecdote # 3: This just happened... I received the following on my Facebook page:

Meg Tocantins (New York, NY) wrote at 9:20pm

"Rita! Yesterday, my brother sent me an email that said, "Thirty-eight."

Our mother died on Ground Hog's Day in 1970. My brother was 10. I was looking for a quotation to send to him and found <http://www.quote garden.com/sympathy.html> and you!

Thanks for helping me cry."

9.) Do you believe in the power of a muse?



Since writing PIM I most certainly do. My Muse appeared as Amy Tan. Here's how it began... I was visiting with my friend Sarah Greene. During the course of our visit, she abruptly jumped out of her chair, left the room, and returned a few moment later with a copy of Amy Tan's book *The Opposite Of Fate*. After admitting that I had not read it, Sarah insisted that I take it. She said that reading the book made her understand why I was a writer. She thought Amy Tan and I had much in common. As I later wrote in PIM:

Later that night while reading Amy's musings, I felt I had found the eastern counterpart to my western soul. I identified with her personal struggles: Both our lives had been touched by a tragic family history, and by a brutal murder. Both our lives were dominated by our ethnic heritage. Both of us sang in bands.

Our greatest difference? She wrote about it; I danced around it. Amy heard the echoes of her family history and resonated with them. I chose to cover my ears until the knelling ceased. It was no wonder that so many years had produced so few pages.

After reading *The Opposite Of Fate*, I realized that Fate had been directing me to write PIM — beginning with the keying accident which led to the discovery of the on-line articles....to my cousin Terri (Sophia character) being in the MA on business the day after the on-line discovery. Terri, years after my father's death, married Jim McGraw (the Greg Haynes character) the defense attorney for the man charged with my father's murder. During dinner with Terri that next night, I told her about what I had found and that's when she referred to my father as the Invisible Man. At that moment I knew the title of the book, *Painting the Invisible Man*, and that I had to explore this story

I kept Amy Tan's book *The Hundred Secret Senses* next to my computer throughout the writing of the book, the back jacket cover featuring her picture staring at me every moment. I believe she took over as my Muse, (even weaving her way into the storyline).



10.) What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

Write every day, if only for an hour. Don't fall in love with your own words. Be smart enough to take a great line out of a story if it does not truly belong there. Write, rewrite, then rewrite again. My mantra: The best part of writing is rewriting -- that's when the magic happens.

11.) Which authors inspire you?

Stephen King does because he can write a book as chilling as *Misery* and then one as compelling *The Shawshank Redemption*. Patricia Cornwell's dedication to research and detail impresses me.

There are screenwriters I greatly admire as well. Aaron Sorkin (*West Wing*) is a master of dialogue and brilliant story construction; Richard Matheson (*The Twilight Zone* – original series) really could spin a sci-fi tale and make it not only plausible, but chillingly real.

And Amy Tan...her writing is sharp, witty, and honest.

12.) Describe your writing schedule.

I tend to chew on a story for months before I start writing. Once I do begin the actual writing process, I write from 5:30 a.m. until about 9:00 a.m. Then I break and spend the day writing for my business clients. I will pick up again in the evening and write until around 11:00 p.m. Once I am in the throes of a story, I try to block out more time in a day or a few days a week where I only focus on my writing.

13.) What are you working on now?



I'm working on a novel entitled *From Hell To Heaven In Five Hail Marys*. The story begins with the funeral of the main character, Nico. Nico lived an egocentric life. During the final months of his terminal illness, Nico begins examining his life, thinking about all the people he had wronged—wives, children friends, family. Filled with so many regrets, Nico asks to see a priest, takes confession for the first time in 40 years. The priest absolves Nico of his sins with a penance of five Hail Marys. Feeling free of a burdened soul, Nico reaches out to the people he hurt throughout his life...with each phone call, Nico feels better. He dies a spiritual free man.

That's just the preamble...

The story explores the aftermath of Nico's unburdening. Nico's confessions may have delivered him to heavenly salvation, but for those he left behind, his amends created a living hell.

14.) Do you think your philosophy background helps in your writing career?

Yes, particularly in the writing of this book when examining concepts of fatalism, self-identity, and determinism.

15.) Do you feel that the Mafia is portrayed falsely in the media?

Not necessarily falsely, specifically when it comes to issues of violence. Regarding familial relationships, movies tend to show how wives have to deal with the girlfriends, the lies, the inherent loneliness. I think *The Sopranos* did try to touch on the lives of the children, but I never felt the show dug deep enough into the kids' psyche. Stories about the Mafia rarely do look at the effects on the children. That is one aspect of PIM I wanted readers to understand. Children are not privy to the truths of their fathers' lives, yet there is always this sense that danger lurks in the shadows. And un-



less one's father is high up in the "Family" tree, money is scarce. Most men drawn to that way of life live dollar to dollar. They blow it on gambling and other excesses as quickly as they earn it.

16.) You host a talk show, "Talk To Me...Conversations with Creative, Unconventional People." Do you have any interesting anecdotes you can share? Do you believe most creative people lead unconventional lives?

Well, I can brag that I had Lisa Genova on my show in February 2008... before all the good press, the big contract, the NYT bestseller list. I discovered her book on Shelfari, bought a copy, read it, and e-mailed her immediately upon finishing the book. I knew *Still Alice* was destined jump from the trunk of her car and onto bookshelves across the globe. And I am thrilled she is coming back on Feb 10, 2009 to talk about the whirlwind the past year has been for her.

I do think creative people march to a different beat. I think creative people tend to be risk-takers. They may not be folks who bungee jump off bridges or climb K2, but they are willing, perhaps even compelled, to put their talents out there to be judged, analyzed, criticized in the hopes that their work will also inspire.