

Questions for Michael Prescott

Welcome to Savvy Authors, Michael. It's a pleasure to have you here. Let's go straight to the heart of the matter. You have written over twenty suspense thrillers, sold over 1.5 million eBooks, and are one of the bestselling eBook writers in the United States. How did you do it? And are there some specific elements that you can pinpoint as keys to your success? Why do you think you were able to thrive in the self-publishing industry?

It was largely a matter of luck. I started putting out my books just at the moment when eBook reading devices were taking off. I have a large backlist, and all the rights had reverted to me, so I was able to self-publish a lot of books very quickly. I priced them at 99 cents, so they sold very quickly. These days the eBook market is much more competitive, and the 99-cent price point doesn't work so well anymore. If I were just entering the eBook marketplace now, I'm sure I wouldn't do nearly as well. I was in the fortunate circumstance of being in the right place at the right time.

Why did you choose to write suspense thrillers, and what are the basic elements that make your thrillers such an engaging read?

I've always liked suspense novels, but at first I really didn't know how to go about writing a police procedural because of all the technical information that's required. When I started reading Stephen King, I realized he'd probably grown up reading the same authors and watching the same movies I had, and his books didn't require much in the way of specialized knowledge. So I tried to emulate his approach, and my first efforts were horror novels. Eventually the market for horror books dried up, but the serial killer craze was just getting started, so I was able to make the transition to what my publisher called "psychological thrillers."

Over time I developed an approach to the genre that works for me. I found I was best at writing a female protagonist and a male villain, comprising the story into a tight time frame – usually one or two days – and having at least two major plot twists, usually one in the middle and the other toward the end. If you can tell a fast-paced story with interesting characters, some good twists, and a strong central conflict, you'll find an audience.

Who is Michael Prescott's audience? How has it changed over the years? Do you envision a specific kind of reader when you write your novels?

I can't say I envision any particular reader, but I have the sense that my female readers outnumber my male readers. That's partly because I focus on female protagonists, but also because women read more than men do.

In a recent interview you mentioned that writing female serial killers was harder than writing a male villain. In fact, I think your exact, hilarious words were: "I've tried writing only one female serial killer. For me, it was harder than writing a male villain. I found I had an unfortunate tendency to make her kind of campy, like Cruella de Vil, only without the puppies." (<http://kelliarsenmurphy.com/2015/05/21/on-writing-5-best-selling-authors-talk-about-the-business-of-writing-serial-killers/>) What makes a good thriller villain? And of all your villains, which one is your most despicable favorite?

I think probably the best villain I wrote was John Cray in *Stealing Faces*, a psychiatrist who runs a mental hospital and actually ends up with the female protagonist of the story as his unwilling patient. Cray, whose name was inspired by the supercomputer company, has most of the elements I find interesting in a bad guy: he's well-educated, intellectual, coldhearted, psychopathic, and has a philosophy of life that can be explored in some depth. Another, somewhat similar character is Peter Faust in *Final Sins*, a murderer who was able to get away with a very light sentence and has since become a twisted kind of celebrity. Naturally, he is still killing people in secret. Again, he's an intellectual sociopath with a personal philosophy. The character was inspired by a couple of books I'd read about Adolf Hitler. I like to have some kind of philosophical or thematic element to the book, and it usually comes out mainly through the villain and the exploration of his pathology.

Your villains may almost always be male characters, but your heroines are often females. Abby Sinclair, Tess McCallum, Bonnie Parker, Donna Wildman, they are only a few on the list. What's the difference between crafting a female protagonist and a female villain? And do you think that female characters will take over the suspense thriller world?

I found by trial and error that I was just better at writing female protagonists. The male protagonists that I came up with tended to be a little flat, while the women were easier to bring to life. And the conflict between a female hero and a male villain usually has a

certain undercurrent of sexual tension that adds something to a story. I've never had much success with female villains, and I doubt I'll do another one. I find it easier to access my own dark side by going into a male character's psychology.

I don't think female characters are going to take over, but there is certainly more of a market for them than there was twenty or thirty years ago. Back then, there was some novelty in just having a female cop or a female FBI agent or whatever, while these days there's no novelty to it at all, so you have to make the characters a little more over the top in order to keep them interesting. Because we're so saturated with entertainment, it's become necessary to make the stories bigger or more far-fetched in order to differentiate them from everything else that's out there.

Looking back, how has your work changed since you began to write in the 1980's?

My horror novels depended largely on shock value - blood and gore. I don't go in for that so much these days, although my most recent book, *Blood in the Water*, does have its unpleasant moments.

Some of my early books were overwritten; they got bogged down in long descriptive passages. I made significant cuts before reissuing them; for instance, I trimmed almost 25,000 words from *Shadow Dance*. Streamlining description is a general trend in fiction writing these days. Books are getting to be more like screenplays. People are more sophisticated about storytelling and don't require so much hand-holding from the author.

With twenty-some novels under your belt, what is your favorite part of the publishing process? What is your least favorite part? What do you think is the most daunting challenge to writers pursuing publication in today's environment?

My least favorite part of the writing process is coming up with the idea and developing it into a capsule storyline. That can be frustrating, and it takes me longer than I'd like. My favorite part is editing any given scene, putting it through various revisions until it works for me. With regard to publishing, as opposed to writing, I always hated having to wait for the book to come out after I'd finished it. Sometimes it would take a year or more, and the book would be a lot less fresh by the time it hit the stores. Of course, self-publishing eliminates this problem.

The most daunting challenge for writers today is to stand out from the crowd. The upside of self-publishing is that you're not dependent on the tender mercies of agents and editors. The downside is that the marketplace is flooded with books, and it's difficult for a newcomer to attract attention. It can be done, but often it requires a certain degree of savvy about social media and self-promotion.

What have been the most significant moments of your career so far? What are the main challenges you've faced in your writer's life? What are some of the sweetest rewards?

Probably the most significant moment was when I heard that my first book, *Manstopper*, had been accepted for publication. For the first time I felt like a real writer. Prior to that, I'd sold a few magazine articles and had done some work as a screenwriter for low-budget producers, but selling my first novel made me feel but I had a real career ahead of me.

The biggest challenge has been to persist in the face of professional ups and downs. I've had to change my identity more than once in order to relaunch myself. It can get discouraging when you're on the verge of breaking out and then the sales figures fizzle and you have to start all over again. You feel like Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the mountain, only to have it roll back down. But the reward, besides the obvious one of producing a body of work that you can be proud of, is the ability to work at home, set your own hours, and make a living by doing something that you would probably do as a hobby.

Is there a new novel in the wings? What's next for Michael Prescott?

Back in 2012 I started a new series featuring a female private eye named Bonnie Parker, who moonlights as an assassin in cases where conventional methods aren't enough. I've put out two books so far, *Cold Around the Heart* and *Blood in the Water*. A third book is in the works now. I expect to publish it later this year. I'm not a very fast writer, and this book has endured a lot of delays, but it's coming together pretty well. I like the character and the series, and I hope to continue with it for a while longer.

Thank you so much for sharing your writers' journey with us, Michael.